



Editorial Essay

Mapping Social Work Research: Pasts, Presents and Futures

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INTRODUCTION

The *Sage Handbook of Social Work Research* aims to provide a comprehensive account of the state of the art of social work research internationally, and in doing so to craft an intellectually original statement that will have a defining and shaping role for social work research, and thus provide an agenda-setting framework for the medium-term future. The *Handbook* reflects the concept and readership level of the publisher's handbook series, as it offers a defining statement on the theory and practice of social work research for the first decades of the twenty-first century. It is written for academics, advanced postgraduate students, social work researchers, experienced practitioner and user researchers, and commissioners and end users of social work research.

The *Handbook* aims to map social work research. To our knowledge this has not been done previously. From their first beginnings, maps have been made for some particular purpose or set of purposes. In so mapping our intention is not simply to portray, nor just to

describe the 'topography', but to actively form and shape the landscape. Rather like the work of the cartographer, mapping a field of research entails a diversity of modes of representation. The success with which the intent of the mapping is accomplished rests in the extent to which the user – in cartographic terms the percipient – understands, and is able to assess and engage with its purpose/s.

Maps carry their own symbology – projection, scale, compass bearings and so on. Our intention in this essay is to suggest the symbology through which the *Handbook*-as-map may be read. The elements in the map space shift – we variously differentiate texture, shade, and orientation throughout the *Handbook*. The central significance given to the idea of context in the second part of the *Handbook* illustrates this extensively.

We accept that there is no final consensus on the purposes of social work research. Still more, we realize that there is no consensus on which methods of research 'fit' particular purposes or contexts. But we believe there is sufficient consensus, from different standpoints, that social work research and practice

are always enhanced when purpose, method, context and domain¹ are brought together in the practice of research.

In speaking of social work and of research we find it helpful to distinguish:

- social work research as empirically apparent;
- social work research as theoretical discourse; and
- social work research as social and moral practice/s.

Reflecting and developing these distinctions, the four key questions the *Handbook* addresses are:

1. What is the role and purpose of social work research?
2. What contexts shape the practice and purpose of social work research?
3. How can we maximize the quality of the practice and method of social work research?
4. How can the aims of social work in its varied domains be met through social work research?

These questions move in and out of focus throughout the *Handbook*, although each in turn provides the primary focus for the four *Handbook* sections – the purposes, contexts, practice and domains of social work research. The writers, board members and editors of the *Handbook of Social Work Research* aspire to a diverse, coherent, critical and comprehensive benchmark statement about the nature and role of social work research and evaluation in contemporary twenty-first century societies around the globe.

The *Handbook* is necessarily diverse and pluralist, as social work research has many representations, multiple stakeholders and audiences, and diverse ideologies. It is also necessarily dynamic. It traces recent and on occasion more distant historical shifts, and projects future pathways. The *Handbook* does not say everything there is to say about social work research, for even a relatively comprehensive project must leave out some perspectives, some ways of knowing, and some spheres of action and interest. As with any decent map, we were faced with judgments about what to include, what to leave

out, and where to place items of interest, for we cannot emulate Lewis Carroll's fictional map that had the scale of one mile to a mile.² To change the metaphor from map to building, we say more about foundations, superstructure, roofing and borders with neighbours, and less on internal room layouts, furnishings and *decor*.

Yet the *Handbook* strives for coherence – a unity enhanced through the organizing framework. In addition, although the *Handbook* specifies important differences among alternative approaches, it also endeavours to specify major commonalities. The emphases in the *Handbook* at different moments are international, national, or local in scope. They find their primary impetus from practitioners, service users, policy makers, or the university community. They may be established or innovative in demeanour. But they share the commonalities of commitment to shared social work values and of seeking to foster the highest standards, quality and value of social work research. Moreover, in each of the four major sections of the *Handbook*, an anchoring chapter offers a critical synthesis of the ideas and discourse presented in that section. Through these framing guidelines, the *Handbook* seeks to make a major contribution to coherence in the field.

We aspire to counter ethnocentrism of various kinds. The field of social work research has sometimes been limited by boundaries of disciplinary domiciles, professional interest and paradigmatic location. National boundaries also have sometimes served to introduce an unnecessary parochialism into the development of the field. The *Handbook* contributors stand against naïve pragmatism on such matters and have been asked to avoid a tendency toward the lowest common denominator. We have sought to resist ethnocentric tendencies through the cultivation of a critical (rather than polemical) and open stance. We asked contributors to include critical, reflexive assessments of positions with which they themselves are associated. Writers were also asked to consider the

overall gains and deficits in the field in which they are writing and, where appropriate, to set out their aspirations as to what developments would make for substantial gains in the medium term future.

The *Handbook* aims for an integration of theory, research and practice within each chapter (although the relative mix of theory, research and practice varies from chapter to chapter). Further, social work research is part of different changing social and political contexts. The *Handbook* contributors acknowledge these contexts. They look backward as well as forward as they overview the field. They also explore linkages with other disciplines and fields of practice. In several of the chapters one of the writers is writing from ‘outside’ social work.

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

Social work research is identifiable through a set of features, none of which exclusively or exhaustively characterizes it, but which can be seen to typify its scope and character. These general features include:

- The use of a broad range of research methods and an acceptance of different linkages between research method and research questions in the contexts, practices and domains of social work research.
- Underpinned by the quest for both usefulness *and* theoretical contributions so that research is not categorized as only ‘pure’ or ‘applied’.
- A pervasive concern with social inclusion, justice and change.
- Work with stakeholders in different aspects of the research process and managing the complex power relationships involved.

The following definition is helpful as a starting point:

Research is understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. Social work is an applied policy and practice-oriented discipline, which is strongly theoretically informed and can generate further developments in

theory, policy and practice. Research in social work covers:

- a. theory, methodology, ethics and values, and pedagogy as they apply to social work and social care and to substantive issues in these areas of study;
- b. relevant links with other disciplines – most importantly anthropology, criminology, demography, development studies, economics, education, gerontology, health studies, history, law, penology, philosophy, politics, psychology, social policy and sociology;
- c. relevant links with other stakeholders, professionals, service users and carers;
- d. policy-making processes, practice, governance, and management, service design, delivery and use, and inter-professional relationships; and
- e. comparative research and research into international institutions, policy and practice. (JUC SWEC, 2006: 3).

Definitions almost without fail give hostages to fortune. They tend to fall into the standard trap of confusing the descriptive and the normative, and too often take the form of staking territorial claims. The JUC SWEC definition is less vulnerable to the second problem but there are apparent tendencies to normative statements – for example in the claim that it is ‘strongly theoretically informed’ and in the aspirational ‘can generate further developments in theory, policy and practice’. It also has a slightly detached feel. It is quite different from other definitions on offer. Take, by way of contrast, the following statement from within a statement on doctoral training requirements:

The focus of social work research is often on those with asymmetrical, stressful or divergent relationships with their fellow citizens, the formal agencies of the local or national state and the formal and informal institutions, processes and structures of the communities and societies in which they live. This requires social work researchers to be aware of and responsive to differences that arise through the lived experience of gender, race, ethnicity, physical and mental capacity and disability, sexuality, age, culture, beliefs and values.³

How far do such statements carry global meaning and agreement? The IFSW/IASSW series of statements (2007) that stem from the core statement setting out an ‘International Definition of the Social Work Profession’ does not include a specific definition of social

work research. However they include within the definition a paragraph headed 'Theory' which starts with the statement that:

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and policy evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. (IFSW/IASSW, 2007: 6).

The 'Global Standards' include as one of five points under the methods of social work practice the statement that these methods include:

Knowledge of social work research and skills in the use of research methods, including ethical use of relevant research paradigms, and critical appreciation of the use of research and the different sources of knowledge about social work practice (IFSW/IASSW, 2007: 21).

However, two points may be offered by way of reflection. First, the statements are fairly cross-cultural. For example, knowledge is said rather uncontroversially to 'include' local and indigenous knowledge, rather than to consist entirely in such knowledge. The appeal to 'systematic' and 'evidence-based' alike suggest a foundational role for mainstream science models. This suggests that the main international groupings of social workers and social work academics accept that the social work profession and its associated research-related roles and activities carry a large degree of common ground across cultures and nations.

Much the same can perhaps be said of statements emerging from individual countries where social work is relatively well established.⁴ Superficially, this may not seem to be the case, as in the following statement about social work from the Finnish National University Network for Social Work (SOSNET):

In Finland, social work has been developed as an independent field of study with its own problem-setting, epistemological and ontological assumptions, research targets and ways of knowledge formation (<http://www.sosnet.fi/?deptid=22096>).

But this claim to independence may be speaking more to an intra- than inter-national audience.

Second, the IFSW/IASSW statements seem to have an aspirational dimension. They illustrate the problem we referred to above of including rhetorical, normative statements in definitions. The SOSNET statement seems to engage in similar rhetoric when it asserts that 'Social workers are involved in producing information with scientific methods and they apply this information in their work'. This is not necessarily a weakness. It would be naïve to expect or even wish for rhetoric-free statements, but we should recognize and respect different categories of claims.

We are not wholly convinced of the wisdom of demanding a single global definition of social work research. This is not in the interests of fuzzy thinking, but more from a fear that such statements are likely to prove bland and unduly rounded. Local and national statements (e.g. Karvinen et al., 1999) are more likely to engage the mind and promote conversation. International statements also risk obscuring the local and the national, often in the name of a variety of pluralism that 'confuses issues of interests with conflicts of power' and 'can balance only those interests that are represented – typically those of the powerful' (House, 1991: 240).⁵

For some, a priority is to link any defining features of social work research to social work practice. 'Practice research', for example, is often associated with strongly voiced discussions about ways of evidencing and knowing. This is as it should be, but it ought not to make us exclusive in our view of the scope of the project. Practice research may be accepted as comprising any disciplined empirical inquiry (research, evaluation, analysis), conducted by researchers, practitioners, service users/carers, which is intended, wholly or to a significant degree, to shed light on or explain social work intervention/practice with the purpose of achieving the goals of social work within or across national cultures.

However, practice or intervention research in the USA is the design and testing of interventions rather than this more general and inclusive definition. In this context, practice

research encompasses multiple levels of interventions from the individual, to families and groups, to organizations, communities and policy involving specific programs. Intervention or practice research is a Design and Development (D&D) study process that uses both quantitative and qualitative research. It may require in-depth interviews with practitioners and literature reviews in the 'engineering' phase in which a practice design occurs of the intervention to be tested. Fashioned as an iterative, sequential approach to developing, designing, testing, refining and retesting of an intervention, intervention research builds on knowledge utilization, outcome evaluation and proceduralization along with field testing. Such D&D is also critical to the adaptation of interventions to diverse populations. Interventions may be retested and reformulated for new populations as well as new target problems.

An alternative way of capturing the nature and field of social work research is to see it as possessing two general identifiers – e.g. as addressing characteristic *substantive* fields, and doing so with one or more characteristic *problem foci* (Shaw and Norton, 2007). From this perspective any given research project or program can be identified against two definers. Some early work has been done along these lines, distinguishing the *substantive* fields into eight actual or potential service user or carer groupings, three citizen, user and community populations, and four professional and policy communities. The *problem foci* are also distinguished into fifteen categories. Cross referring the two sets of defining categories yields a mathematical possibility of 225 different kinds of research, although the maximum meaningful number is much less than this although as yet cannot be affirmed with any confidence.⁶ The following examples illustrate the category levels:

Substantive fields

- Adult offenders/victims (service user/carer category);
- People as members of communities (citizen populations)

- Social work practitioners/managers (professional/policy communities)

Problem foci

- Understand/explain issues related to equality, diversity, poverty and social exclusion
- Understand/develop/assess/evaluate social work practices, methods, or interventions
- Understand/promote learning and teaching about social work or related professions

This framework is at an early stage of development. There are no inter-rater measures between different stakeholder groups. Furthermore, for it to be used across countries then inter-cultural ratings will be an essential prior requirement. But it may hold promise of a more evidenced approach to important discussions regarding cultural competence in research, and for understanding the extent of common ground between different national and indigenous social work research visions and practices.

Valuable as these approaches may be, the writers of a *Handbook* that purports to identify social work research as a field with discipline-like qualities cannot avoid questions of where social work research sits in relation to other fields or disciplines.⁷ For example, should we conclude from the foregoing that social work research is and ought to be different from research in social science disciplines, and even from other areas of 'applied' research, such as education or health?

An illustration may clarify. It has sometimes been suggested that social work research has a distinctively radical critique of positivism. The references to positivism in social work are almost always negative, as when the broadside is fired that 'positivists not only see their work as uncontaminated: they see themselves as pure and safe in their objectivity, an elite who have managed to transcend the constraints of subjectivity' (Everitt et al., 1992: 6).⁸

We have two problems with this and similar arguments. First, the key terms – positivist, objectivity, and subjectivity – tend to be treated as self-explanatory, and in need of no unpacking. Arguments become a form

of sloganizing – ‘a swearword by which no-one is swearing’ (Williams, 1983) – and leave proponents vulnerable to being regarded as partial, and as a consequence run the risk of being ignored. Second, it undermines a culture of reciprocal exchange and argument that should mark social work activity at all levels. Lying behind claims to social work’s special character is, we suspect, an old heresy that for many years was prevalent – the belief that social work has a basic value position that has greater merit/greater human authenticity/is more whole-person oriented, etc. than other professions and disciplines. Even when the term ‘paradigm’ is not used, these sorts of arguments have the marks of a naïve paradigm position. Hammersley is right to warn that paradigm talk on this level ‘obscures both potential and actual diversity in orientation, and can lead us into making simplistic methodological decisions’ (Hammersley, 1995: 3). To pick up his second point, this problem is apparent when one hears the occasional argument that quantitative analysis is inherently ‘positivist’, whereas qualitative methodology is somehow more reflective of social work values.

Social work and social work research will be the poorer if we over-emphasize their distinctives. It will make us disinclined to listen to the voices of colleagues in other disciplines and professions. If we espouse professionally joined-up services, why not disciplinarily joined-up research? On most occasions the right question to ask is not what makes social work research distinctive, but what might make it distinctively good?

There are advantages stemming from the conventional view that social work is a multi-disciplinary field that draws reflectively on a wide range of disciplines, rather in the way that the JUC SWEC definition of social work research suggests. The advantages arise from the differences between one field or discipline and another. For example, disciplines vary in how far their identities are respectively empirical, hermeneutic or critical. From this distinction we can draw on a plausible

interdisciplinary rationale to conceptualize social work research as being committed to evidence, learning/reflection and emancipation without having to set these commitments in a hierarchy. Of course, this only takes us so far. Evidence does not make us free in the absence of other conditions; neither does reflection guarantee we will reach the truth. Perhaps a theory of communicative action and of discourse ethics, following Habermas, will do – not as solutions to concrete issues ‘so much as a set of recommended practices within which such solutions may be pursued’ (Outhwaite, 2000: 657). One such recommendation for standards of discourse, advocated by Martyn Hammersley, is summarized in the ‘Places in Time’ chapter that explores an overview of contextual issues in social work research. Deliberative processes of this kind are, of course, close to democratic theory. They also have been applied to and developed in the field of evaluation (e.g. House and Howe, 1999).

Social work research in time and place

Social work research adjoins – and is challenged by – other contemporary fields and disciplines. It also has a history – indeed, histories – and a place that suggest the nature of social work research is not always similar from time to time or from place to place. Feminist histories of social work research go to figures such as Jane Addams,⁹ when the politics of gender were brought to the fore especially through ‘settlement sociology’ (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2007). Mainstream academic histories may cite Charles Loch in the UK or Edith Abbott in the USA. Histories of social work research also vary by country. Nordic histories trace the origins of later distinctives in earlier moments and people. The recent development of social work in countries of the Asia Pacific Rim will develop their own narratives. One stream within the UK has been the

policy research tradition that goes back to the Fabian impact on policy from the late years of the nineteenth century, with Beatrice and Sydney Webb, and the relationship of social work to the emerging discipline of social policy. Other histories set social work in a related or more widely encompassing social category – human services in the USA, social care in the UK, social pedagogy in the Baltic States and elsewhere in Europe.

But despite this multiplicity of histories, we think it is possible to argue for a common approach to ‘doing history’ in social work research. The point is made elsewhere in this *Handbook* that to insist on the importance of history is not simply a point about methodology, but has regard to a way of thinking – of ‘focusing “upstream” on the historical roots of contemporary relationships’ (Mallinson et al., 2003: 773). Walter Lorenz has pressed this point effectively (Lorenz, 2007). He complains that it is as if we are ‘too embarrassed to look seriously at our history, afraid of the disorder we might find, too eager to distance ourselves from the pre-professional beginnings’ and are, in consequence, homeless and ‘disembedded’ (Lorenz, 2007: 598, 599). He concludes that ‘All social work practices are deeply embedded in historical and cultural habits from which we cannot detach ourselves at will’, and aptly infers from this that we should be practising history ‘in the dual sense of positioning ourselves in a historical context and of giving our interventions a historical dimension’ (Lorenz, 2007: 601).

But in speaking about the history of social work research, we are on uncertain ground. While there are some valuable parts of a jigsaw in place (e.g. Diner, 1977; Lubove, 1965; Kirk and Reid, 2002: Ch 2; Timms, 1968), these tend to take social work in general as their reference point. We are not sure when ‘social work research’ achieved common currency in social work, though it was probably associated with the slippage of ‘case work’ from a term for the whole to a term for a part (‘casework’) of ‘social’ work.

Standard accounts of the history of social work research lack depth. Some of the central questions are scarcely asked:

- To expand the argument made by Lorenz, what role does research play in the collective memories of social work?
- How does social work research relate historically to the emergence of research in other social science disciplines?
- What are the main themes in a critical narrative of social work research’s past and its relation to other disciplines?
- Were certain knowledge conditions necessary for the emergence and development of social work research?

On the fourth question, it is likely that the growing hold of modern rational philosophy was a major contributing knowledge condition for social work research, with its basic ‘proposition that humans interact and that their interactions have, over many centuries, become more and more complex, more and more rational, and, with it, more and more able to use rationalism to resolve their differences’ (Wickham and Freemantle, 2008: 924).¹⁰ There are various forms of social work research that are clear heirs to rational philosophy, and it is plausible to interpret the emergence of the early university-linked social work programmes in Chicago, Boston, Minnesota, New York and the London School of Economics as seeking, and to a fair extent gaining, credibility through their commitment to a strong intellectual and rational stance.

Yet almost from day one, social work research sat uncomfortably between the social sciences and the world of practice and policy. For example, the early USA social work pioneer at Chicago, Edith Abbott, complained that ‘some of our social science friends are afraid that we cannot be scientific because we really care about what we are doing ...’ (Diner, 1977: 11). In addition to the doubts of their ‘social science friends’ Abbott and her colleague Sophonisba Breckinridge famously referred to ‘our eastern colleagues’ (the social

work programmes at Boston and New York) who ‘told us we could not have casework and fieldwork in a university’ (Diner, 1977: 7; c.f. Lubove, 1965: 265).¹¹

Being simultaneously ‘scientific’ and ‘really’ caring may have gone hand in hand for Abbott, but the two have more often been uneasy bedfellows. We have aspired to a position that has affinity with that held by Abbott, in ways that we sketched in the early part of this introductory essay. But we do not wish to dissolve contrasting commitments – e.g. to rigor or to emancipatory research. Indeed, different manifestations of research as heirs of rational philosophy are not sufficient as an explanation of the knowledge conditions for social work research. Wickham and Freemantle (2008) detect in earlier sociology, through at least to Weber, a domain of the social that owes much to voluntarist philosophy going back to Thomas Hobbes – where the stress lies on the will rather than the mind. It may not be unduly simple to suggest that several of the major debates among social work researchers have their ground in whether their advocates are primarily influenced by rationality or voluntarism. But even if this general interpretation stands up following further work, such historical work will doubtless prove ‘a process so full of surprises that no theory or set of protocols can ever anticipate it’ (Baehr, 2008: 947).

DIVERSE, COHERENT, CRITICAL, COMPREHENSIVE – IDENTIFYING TENSIONS

We have tried throughout the process of crafting this *Handbook* to sustain a sense of a recognizable field, but of unresolved and probably best-left-unresolved tensions. This is reflected among the contributors, the advisory board and within the editorial team. In an early exchange of thinking we set out our aspirations for the *Handbook* as a diverse, coherent, critical and comprehensive project. We expressed these aspirations in a form that

has proved enduring over the three years it has been in development. We said that the *Handbook of Social Work Research* would offer in one volume a coherent benchmark statement about the nature and role of social work research and evaluation in contemporary twenty-first century societies in many countries around the globe. There are deliberate oppositional elements in this way of conveying the project – diverse *but* coherent; comprehensive *but* critical; coherent *but* dynamic.

To flesh out these necessary tensions within the *Handbook*, we pursue just one of them. The melding of criticality and comprehensiveness was perhaps the most demanding fusion asked of contributors. Our stance on criticality has aimed to sustain how a position can be advocated but not in partisan way. Thus, even *within* given stances – critical practice, evidence-based practice, etc. – there are diverse debates. We will be satisfied if the *Handbook* proves comprehensive in that sense among others. We invited contributors to give recognition to seriously held justice-informed positions that have been present in social work research, but which may be ones that the writers did not hold.

Taking a UK example,¹² the Fabian tradition of research linked to the welfare state formed the core of the emerging discipline of social policy in the UK. The influential research of people such as Richard Titmuss, E.H. Halsey, Peter Townsend and others – embodied in the Fabian Society – was characterized by a realist trust of empirical evidence and scepticism of theoretical stances. The Fabian Society is a democratically constituted membership organization. It is affiliated to the British Labour Party but is organizationally independent. George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Oscar Wilde and all Labour prime ministers have been members of the society. It is an intellectual socialist movement, whose purpose is to advance the principles of social democracy via gradualist and reformist, rather than revolutionary means. It represents a justice-informed position for social research and one that is alive and well in the social work research

community. The dominance of left-leaning political positions among social work academics has been a continuing strand here.

Holders of the Fabian position have been forcefully criticized by Marxists as ‘drawing room socialists’.¹³ Yet there is diversity even here. There are those Marxist academics who decline to adopt an activist position as part of their research or take a direct and explicit involvement in transformative action through their research. Popkewitz illustrates this position. We do not do justice to his position by a single quote, but he argues that ‘social scientists are partisans in the forming of social agendas through the practices of science’ (Popkewitz, 1990: 50).

This does not exhaust justice-based stances. There are older traditions. Robert Dingwall discusses the moral discourse of interactionism and draws on Adam Smith for how the moral and the empirical plug together. He concludes ‘If we have a mission for our discipline, it may be to show the timeless virtues of compromise and civility, of patient change and human decency, of a community bound by obligations rather than rights’ (Dingwall, 1997: 204). This example is taken from sociology and may have as few direct parallels in social work as it does in sociology. But the diversity of positions – UK Fabianism, differences on partisanship within Marxism, and the more conservative position of Dingwall – illustrate how general commitments can be part of a research community without requiring the same stance on the part of everyone.

We wanted writers to acknowledge these tensions and positions. We did not expect writers to consent to them in a pluralist fashion, but we *did* want them, where appropriate, to accept that they are positions that can meaningfully be held and contested. We had this in mind when we asked contributors to include critical, reflexive assessments of positions with which they themselves are associated. Needless to say, we did not expect all the contributors to sign up to every detail of our position, and we were content that differences between contributors should

remain within the *Handbook*. By way of illustration, we engaged in a lengthy and eventually unresolved discussion with the authors of one chapter regarding ways in which a critical stance on the social model of disability and related questions might be expressed within the *Handbook*’s commitment to melding criticality and comprehensiveness. It remains reasonable to us to acknowledge the force of the comments on the chapter from one Board member who reflected from within a critical commitment that:

The medical model once represented an enormous advance over the moralising approach which connected disability to metaphysical forces and causes. The medical model contributed towards the regaining of dignity by disabled people by making their condition treatable. This must be seen as an attempt of inclusion, belonging to the general project of modernity – with all its ambiguity! It is the crisis of modernity ... which facilitated the demise of the individual model and the rise of a constructivist view of a whole range of social realities, including disability (but also gender and ethnicity for instance).

This takes us back to our assumptions about the advisability of a form of scholarly discourse that includes such exchanges. We are not sure that there is unanimity regarding such terms of discourse. Researchers who hold a strong standpoint position, for example on issues of race or gender, or who believe that the more important differences underlying debates within the social work community are epistemologically paradigmatic in nature, would probably have difficulty in conceding this position. Researchers who hold a diametrically different position, and believe that research pragmatics permit unanimity on all key issues, would also, we think, find it difficult to align with our position that closure on debates and differences is premature – indeed, perhaps inappropriate. Hence, while assuming that a real, mutually understood conversation regarding big questions is possible, we stand against such closure.

We may perhaps describe this as a ‘coalition’¹⁴ though this unhelpfully suggests something temporary and entered into for some

immediate purpose. The kind of community we have in mind calls for a term that suggests that this is something about the essence of how things ought to be (and therefore not temporary) but also avoids assuming a united alliance. Another way of expressing this mode of containing matters is to see it as a position on the *levels* at which debates can be taken forward – at a ‘middle-range’ of generality, whereby differences of approach can be acknowledged, without requiring an abandonment of the quest for collective positions.

MAPPING THE HANDBOOK: PURPOSES, CONTEXTS, PRACTICES AND DOMAINS

The purposes of social work research

The chapters in this section are organized around distinct but not exclusive traditions and ways of doing, thinking and knowing within social work research. Each represents a particular role or purpose for social work research in society. For each tradition, contributors were asked to consider issues of philosophy and paradigm, theory, practice and critique. We expressed these issues in the form of questions. What is the philosophical framework justifying this tradition? What major research approaches characterize this intellectual tradition? What does research practice within this intellectual tradition look like? Whose interests does it serve? What major questions does it answer? What are important critiques of this understanding of the purpose of research? What are its particular benefits and limitations? What are important future areas for development?

Social work research will be distinctive insofar as, *inter alia*, it achieves a thoroughgoing consistency with broader social work purposes. It will do so when it severally aims to:

- generate or enhance theory and knowledge about social work and social care;

- provide impartial evidence about and for decision-making;
- instrumentally improve practice and organizational learning;
- highlight the quality of lived experience and advance practical wisdom; and
- promote justice, social change and social inclusion.

The chapters in the opening section directly reflect these benchmarks. We have not asked writers to present these in a pragmatic ‘pick-and-mix’ manner. Indeed, as we elucidate below, thinking of social work research as a purposeful enterprise is one area of the *Handbook* where the intended tensions of the project come to the surface. Are differences in research purpose paradigmatic in nature? How do we respond to diversity if we espouse a form of pluralism? Is social work research a discipline?

Part of our response to these enduring questions is to enter a plea that social work research should be conceptualized in such a way that ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research are not in conflict, and applied research is not seen in deficit terms as a methodologically lesser form of research. But this does not tell us whether some ways of expressing research purpose in social work ought to be given greater weight than others. We suggest that there are, in fact, three possible positions on this question, rather than just two.

Some research purposes 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 other ‘inner-science’ criteria, on this view, will always be more important than ‘outer-science’ criteria). The same general stance 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 – though of course the direction indicators are in quite the reverse, giving precedence to ‘outer-science’ purposes over ‘inner-science’ ones.

The weightiest research purpose in social work will always be contingent on local context and the perspectives of the stakeholders, and cannot be 'assigned' in advance. This position is sometimes loosely referred to as a 'postmodern' position – 'loosely' because typically under-developed and perhaps assumed to be beyond countermanding.

A third position – and one with which we find ourselves in broad sympathy – is that:

'Inner' and 'outer' science criteria of quality are both indispensable, and 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. On this premise, 'outer-science' norms or purposes (e.g. being useful or emancipatory) are neither more nor less intrinsically important than 'inner science' epistemic norms.¹⁵

Stuart Kirk and Nigel Parton set the scene for this in their opening chapter where they reflect upon the nature and purposes of contemporary social work as a context for thinking about the role of research. Their primary aim is to provide some thoughts on what they see as the nature and purposes of social work and how these have developed both historically and comparatively. The central argument of the chapter is that debates about the nature and purposes of social work research cannot be separated from debates about the nature and purposes of social work. Their secondary aim is to outline how research can be seen to have contributed to the enterprise and might do so in the future.

Annette Boaz and James Blewett draw on their different perspectives in elaborating how providing objective, impartial evidence for decision-making, and providing public accountability, form a core organizing purpose for social work research. Boaz and Blewett note how the relationship between *knowledge* and differing research traditions influences social work decision making. Social work traditions which might be characterized as the therapeutic, the social order,

and the emancipatory, each have their own perspective on evidence. In the authors' view, the challenge of enhancing the decision making process by practitioners will require systematic efforts at improving the quality and synthesis of evidence. In one of several chapters contributed by the editors, Joan Orme and Katharine Briar-Lawson explore ways in which generating or enhancing theory and knowledge about social problems and social policy and how best to enhance policy development acts as a driver for much social work research. In an exploration of the history of the relationship between research, policy and practice they argue for an iterative dialogue between the three which reflects the complexity of researching the personal and political dimensions of social work practice.

Daniel Gredig and Jeanne Marsh interweave their European and North American outlooks in unfolding the improvement of social work intervention and practice as a recurrent purpose of social work research. Offering four conceptualizations of research for practice, and their critique, they explore the relationship between research and practice and the contribution of empirical research to the development of practice. Underpinning the discussion are distinctions between 'intervention' and 'professional practice' and an exploration of the extent to which research approaches reflect a commitment to professional values and ethics.

Taken together these three chapters broadly, though not unconditionally, represent different manifestations of commitment to rigor and rationality. The following two chapters reflect more the influence of voluntarist philosophy. Sue White and Gerhard Riemann start from the general stance that a defining purpose of social work research is highlighting and advancing the quality of lived experience, practical wisdom, and personal and organizational learning. They develop this through depicting what they regard as the intrinsic affinity between the activities involved in the reconstructive analysis and assessment of single and collective cases in social work and related processes

in research. Bob Pease's chapter concludes this framework-setting opening section of the *Handbook*. Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of books and articles advocating broadly justice-based and critical standpoints for social work research. Pease does not simply *reprise* these arguments. Rather, he places the debates and issues in ways that both challenge social work readers and researchers of whatever hue, and creatively takes the research agenda forward for critical researchers and others influenced by developments in this field. He outlines some of the implications of theories of knowledge and structural and discursive locations on the ethics and politics of how we do research.

Contexts

The *Handbook* aspires to reflect the diversity within social work research while having, as we have mentioned earlier, a coherence and comprehensiveness. This diversity is mirrored in the social, relational, political, intellectual and ethical dimensions of social work research as a practice engaged with people. These rich and challenging contexts are explored in this section of the *Handbook*. By devoting a quarter of the *Handbook* to research contexts, we are signalling our seemingly paradoxical belief that the more one endeavours to understand social work research in ways that speak to the international social work community, the greater becomes the significance of contextual issues.

We remarked at the beginning of this essay that the *Handbook* is diverse and pluralist, as social work research has many representations, multiple stakeholders and audiences, and diverse ideologies. Pluralism is, to borrow Popper's term, a 'bucket' word, too often left as if it spoke for itself.¹⁶ For us, we can comfortably adopt for social work research a statement on pluralism from a discussion of evaluation, as having:

... many countenances, multiple vested audiences, and diverse ideologies. Part of this pluralism is

indeed ideological ... Part of this pluralism is temporal, as evaluation is intrinsically linked to changing societal and international ideals and aspirations. And part of this pluralism is spatial, as evaluation is inherently embedded in its contexts, which themselves vary in multiple ways (Mark et al., 2006: 10).

We have sought to engage with this pluralism in different ways, perhaps most obviously by representing different social work research traditions, purposes, domains and practices. We have also aimed to respect and highlight different differences and commonalities. Finally, we have aspired, as explained elsewhere, aspired to counter ethnocentrism of various kinds, most persistently through the collaborative forms of authorship to which we refer later in this essay.¹⁷ In casting pluralism in these terms, we distance ourselves from the soft relativism that would allow all ideologies an equal chance of expression. Relativism can helpfully be adopted as a way of thinking when one is trying to understand another culture (c.f. Hacking, 1999). But this willing suspension of belief as an attitude of mind should not be confused with relativism – that combination of 'intuitionism and alchemy' (Geertz, 1973: 30).

The section opens with an overview by Ian Shaw and Joan Zlotnik of the government context for research. The structural context of government and its reciprocal relationship with social work research is the focus of this chapter. The writers distinguish between research as a means of governing, and research as the evaluation of government, and concentrate primarily on the former – the uses that governments make of evaluation and research as a means of governing. They include a review of general government approaches to research funding.

Other structural contexts, e.g. regarding wider political contexts, and social science disciplines, are dealt with in the chapters by Soydan, Mäntysaari and Weatherley. Haluk Soydan analyzes the nature and role of politics and values, both as critical contextual features of social work research practice and as intertwined with knowledge claims

associated with research. Cross-national ideological differences and the consequences for social work research are also considered. The chapter concludes that values and politics impact on social work research practice, but this does not necessarily lead to biased research results in social work. Application of what are described as extra-scientific and intra-scientific norms and criteria can help to recognize, control for and eliminate biases in social work research. This chapter may be read in conjunction with Mikko Mäntysaari and Richard Weatherley's analysis of the role of theory and theoretical knowledge in social work research. They trace the historical evolution of theory in social work in light of debates about the nature of theory, and examine current trends in theorizing. Social work writing on research has on occasion been unduly parochial, as if social work is a hermetically sealed field of action and study, with its own values, methodology, preoccupations and historical lineage. Mäntysaari and Weatherley serve to disabuse us of that fallacy. Like a number of chapters, they offer a perspective born of European/North American collaboration.

Political and intellectual contexts both pose questions of ethics. Richard Hugman majors on this in his chapter on ethics as context for social work research. He locates ethics within social relationships, especially those constituted by power, and examines processes and procedures in research to explore this. Acknowledging the challenges presented by developments in applied ethics the chapter emphasizes ethics as process rather than event and highlights connections between ethics of social work research and the wider professional field of social work.

One of the most self-evident contexts for social work research is social work practice and institutions and settings in which it takes place. Yet scarcely anything has been written that foregrounds this. Steven Trevillion expresses the point succinctly in his contribution to the *Handbook*. He remarks that 'The relationship between research and the practice contexts in which it takes place is one of

the most important and yet poorly understood issues facing social work researchers. In particular, we seem to know very little about the ways in which practice influences research'. His starting point is the idea that it is possible (even necessary) to conceive of research about practice as an outcome of what goes on in the practice domain. In response to the ways that social work practice needs to be understood at different levels, he suggests a three-level model of practice with each level linked to particular examples of emergent research. His argument integrates the practice context with research in ways that open up the scope for more coherent research – and practice.

Almost all of this section envisages contexts as either contemporaneous with, or precursors to, the research act. Roy Ruckdeschel and Adrienne Chambon's chapter on the uses of social work research is located in this part of the *Handbook* because research takes a major part of its character from context as futures. Ruckdeschel and Chambon identify three aspects of research utilization, these being knowledge development, 'use' in the sense of how knowledge is incorporated into social work practice, and knowledge dissemination. Utilization is illustrated through exemplars involving social work professionals and service users with a particular emphasis on community-based activist research. The challenges presented by the internet and the evolving forms of media for the dissemination of social work knowledge on a global level are explored.

The final chapter offers a big-picture appraisal of how social work researchers have shaped – and ought to shape – their work in the light of these contexts. Ian Shaw adopts a moderately strong position on context. He acknowledges the influence of wider social theorizing for thinking and living in time and place, before reflecting on context as the focus and concern of the research act – both methodological and substantive. The ensuing part of the chapter considers social work practice as context for research, before turning to the varied elements of the social work and

wider academic communities. The closing part of the chapter considers those contexts extrinsic to the immediate research act – the state, city, rurality and the community – and includes aspects of race and politics.

The practice of social work research

The distinctive character of this *Handbook* – mapping social work research as a discipline-like field of study – has meant that tracts of literature normally central to the landscape of social work research texts appear here in more general, discursive forms or in some cases not at all. This applies most obviously to methods for the collection and analysis of data. This is not because we are indifferent to either the importance or indeed attraction of ‘methods-talk’, and we have made our own efforts to contribute to that literature elsewhere. It is rather because we have chosen to explore questions of methodology and methods *within the identity of the discipline-like field of social work research*. Hence we say much more about methodology than methods, and what we and contributors do say is in almost all cases embedded within the larger fields of purposes, contexts and research domains.

A central assumption we bring to this section is that social work research methodology generally does not draw on methods original to social work, but on the range of social science fieldwork choices in, for example, sociology, policy analysis, education, health, and psychology. It is the core purposes (Section I) and contexts (Section II) of social work that give its research methodology a distinctive ‘shape’ and which give a distinguishing mix to the palette of methods. Positions regarding methodology are also entailed in the final section of the *Handbook*. For example, the writers of the chapters for that section were invited to reflect on how particular domains of social work research gave identity and character to the methodology of the research enterprise. Social work research is therefore likely to draw more

extensively on some fieldwork methods than on others, or at least draw on them in characteristic ways. Writers for this part of the *Handbook* were asked to exemplify this illustratively, rather than comprehensively. However, they were encouraged to develop consideration of how the contexts and purposes of social work have contributed to a distinctive ‘set’ of methodological interests, and to suggest possible future developments. For this reason, the chapters in this section partly mirror in an overt way those in the opening section.

Thus, methodology is not described out of context or in the usual form of a research methods text. Instead, methods are discussed in relation to the purpose, context and value considerations raised in the preceding sections. In doing so, we do not wish to plead for a one-to-one matching of method and purpose. For example, we emphatically do not want to present restrictive visions of qualitative methods as suited only for the purpose of highlighting and advancing the quality of lived experience, or of randomized control trials as fit simply for the purpose of providing objective, impartial evidence for decision-making. Indeed, a major editorial agreement for this proposal was to avoid presenting methods under the conventional rubrics of qualitative and quantitative. This is not because we think the distinction no longer matters, nor even because we think that we no longer have any lessons to learn from paradigm thinking. We see a degree of continuing sharp debate over such matters as healthy and recognize the value of not prematurely resolving basic differences in positions (c.f. Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto, 2006).

The *Handbook* does, as we indeed hoped, include a range of positions on these issues, and would not take the position, popular in the social work community at the time of writing, that mixed methods are by definition stronger than quantitative or qualitative methods to the exclusion of the other. This decision is linked to our aspiration that the *Handbook* will help shape and (re)define

social work research. We intend that it should be methodologically comprehensive. We have endeavoured to ensure the *Handbook* addresses newer developments and neglected methodologies, and that it does not give undue space and weight to familiar territory such as evidence-based practice, interview methods, randomized control trials and research assumptions stemming from western experience of social work research.

The third *Handbook* section opens with a wide-angle reflection on the practice of social work research. Jackie Powell and Blanca Ramos – drawing on experience in England, South and North America – focus primarily on what we know of the experience of doing social work research. They consider the experience of a range of stakeholders including career researchers, practitioners, social work faculty, and social work users. They reflect on how the researcher manages the tensions arising from different and often competing interests within the research process in the pursuit of generating knowledge that is both rigorous and relevant, and conducted in ways that seek to make the research process both transparent and inclusive. An appreciation of the competing values, ideologies and commitments of the various interests involved in research serves to underline the multiple obligations of the researcher and the complex issue of accountability.

This research practice-led chapter is following by an attempt by Ian Shaw to place social work research in the context of the extensive literature regarding the logic of social research, and judgments regarding its quality. The purposes of this chapter are two-fold. First, to explore the nature of and requirements for good-enough reasons for thought and action in social work research. Second, to deliberate whether there are general criteria that provide a framework for reaching considered judgments regarding the quality of social work research. In doing so, he sets out to stand against naïve pragmatism and avoid any tendency toward a lowest common denominator. His hope in doing so is to resist ethnocentric tendencies through

the cultivation of a critical (rather than polemical) and open stance, and to include reflexive assessments of positions with which he has associated himself.

The section then opens up with a short series of direct parallels between this section – the nearest we get to a conventional discussion of methodology – and the opening section on the purposes of research. Geraldine Macdonald and Jenny Popay's chapter on methods for providing evidence of effectiveness and improving social work intervention echoes the chapters by Boaz and Blewett, and Gredig and Marsh. Jane Gilgun's chapter on methods for enhancing theory and knowledge about problems and policies calls back to Katharine Briar-Lawson and Joan Orme's discussion in Chapter 3 of generating or enhancing theory and knowledge about social problems and social policy and enhancing policy development. The chapter by Carmen Lavoie, Judy MacDonald and Elizabeth Whitmore develops the methodological implications of the chapters by White and Riemann, and Pease. How well the *Handbook* works depends in part on this connectivity – a central driver of the project – that methodology is most helpfully considered as related to judgments regarding purpose.

We have set out our stall to discuss methods in relation to the purpose, context and value considerations raised in the preceding sections. In doing so, we stressed that do not wish to plead for a one-to-one matching of method and purpose. Having taken this approach, a natural question arises regarding the approach social work researchers ought to adopt towards the proliferating literature on mixed-methods research. Peter Sommerfeld joins forces with Jennifer Greene – a leading writer and thinker on mixed methods research within the international evaluation community – and Wendy Haight, to develop a position on methodological decision-making that avoids the distracting naïve pragmatism and provides an intelligence-led stance that will add to the coherence of the arguments in this section. The chapter on mixing methods in this section takes a

position with which we would generally concur.

The opening chapter by Powell and Ramos and the closing chapter by Katharine Briar-Lawson, Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders together provide the book-ends for this section, looking around and forward, respectively. The final chapter addresses challenges and directions in the practice of social work research. The authors lay out challenges in advancing research that is relevant, inclusive, and practice based. Intervention or practice research strategies are discussed along with systematic research reviews. In addition exemplars include approaches to participatory research and developmental research approaches.

Domains of social work research

This section includes chapters reviewing some of the major practice and service domains in which social work research has been carried out. The *Handbook* authors recognize the creative potential of diverse locations for social work research. However, a central agenda has been to counteract any limiting tendencies to professional insularity within the fields of both practice and research. The nature and boundaries of social work services is perhaps the area where there is the greatest degree of diversity between and even within countries. The risk of ethnocentrism is pervasive in a project of this kind, but nowhere more so than in this section. Hence, the editors emphasized consideration of the analytic problems of generalizing from research in one social work domain to that in another, as well as the prospect of cross-domain research, cross-national transfer of learning, and social work research that is both domain-specific and in a global context. Hence, the emphasis on integrative developments is not at the expense of necessary distinctions about the development of social work research in different domains.

The chapter themes are presented in a relatively context-free frame of reference to avoid

the hazards touched on above. Each of the chapters in this section addresses problems and services. 'Health and Well-being', for example, includes both health *problems* and health *services*. Put slightly differently, each chapter has something to say that links back to the varied purposes of social work research covered in the opening section.

Contributors to the section were asked to include a concise historical outline of the development of research and evaluation in their field, as well as a substantial section exploring likely future developments including key research and other agendas, with exemplars. Contributors were also asked to bear in mind the structure of the volume as a whole. For example, they may have addressed, as appropriate, the roles and *purposes*, social and disciplinary *contexts*, and research *practice* issues that have most influenced social work research *in their field*. This is intended to add to the coherence of the volume as a whole, and contribute to the adequate coverage of different traditions. Writers were asked to consider a number of permeating dimensions, including social exclusion, diversity, poverty, race, gender and indigenization, while recognizing that these are not unproblematic terms.

Linda Briskman opens this last section of the *Handbook* with a forceful discussion of nation as domain for research. There are superficial overlaps with the early chapter in Section Two, but in that case government, politics and so on were under consideration as *contexts* for research. In this final section they are present as the organizing key category for the focus of the research itself. The 'Nation' chapter challenges the 'orthodoxy' of all aspects of social work research: ethics, epistemology and methodology. Drawing on examples of research in the areas of people movements, asylum seekers and refugees; indigenous peoples; and development, world poverty and aid the chapter argues that it is necessary to go beyond traditional research paradigms to develop research to challenge 'evidence' presented to support policies antithetical to human rights.

The collaboration between Karen Staller and Tracie Mafile'o has enabled the project to include a chapter where the domain of community has been explored from the very different national contexts of the USA and Tonga and New Zealand. They consider the different ways in which community is conceptualized in social work practice and research. This leads them to an overview of the historical unfolding of community-based research, including discussions of the settlement house movement, and developments in ethnographic practices, participatory action methods, feminist and standpoint theories, and indigenous/non-Western research, each as part of the evolving landscape of research methods as they relate to community domain. They helpfully turn in closing to consider future directions.

The subsequent chapters treat domains in somewhat more discrete terms – children, young people and families, health and well-being, disability, mental health and aging. Mary Ruffolo, June Thoburn and Paula Allen Meares bring together themes and issues from the very substantial array of social work research in the domain of children and families. They address studies that advance service access and effective interventions across diverse systems and settings. Cross-national and cross-jurisdiction research initiatives are cited which promote knowledge brokering for effective practices. Major longitudinal surveys and systematic reviews are also discussed. Research gaps in rigour are also addressed.

Paul Bywaters has collaborated with Mike Ungar – a UK/Canada nexus – to address the equally extensive domain of health and well-being. Although they omit issues regarding disability and mental health – both of which fall in subsequent chapters – in other respects they set their terms broadly. Reflecting the *Handbook's* notion of domain, they not only discuss research about health *care* or social work activity in health *settings* (such as primary care teams or hospitals) but also care provided in communities by informal providers. They are particularly illuminating in

their identification of a number of areas where it can be argued that social work is breaking new conceptual and methodological ground in health research. Among these are service user involvement, resilience (positive growth under stress), and the indigenization of health knowledge.

The chapters on disability and on mental health are contributed by Sally French and John Swain (disability) and Peter Huxley, Michael Sheppard and Martin Webber. French and Swain capture the positions with which they have been associated in their previous collaborative work. They present their perspective on the centrality of consumer-driven research. They discuss their views of participatory research and the necessity of involving participants with disabilities in all phases of the research. They advocate for emancipatory research as a preferred form of participatory practices. While Sheppard, Huxley and Webber are all working in different locations within the UK, their links with researchers in several countries gives a breadth to their discussion of the domain of mental health. The authors describe the important contributions of mental health social work research (MHSW) and discuss its interface with other social work research domains. They also explore contributions to transferable service development and organization, to clinical and practice research, to diversity and equity-related issues, and consider future prospects for MHSW research. Ageing is addressed by Phil McCallion who illustrates the range of social work research approaches in this area. The growing potential for secondary data analysis, the value of longitudinal studies and the need for different frameworks and research approaches to support translational research work are highlighted as are the benefits of multidisciplinary research teams.

The chapter on criminal justice has been accomplished by collaboration that perhaps more than any other in the *Handbook* delivers new collaboration. Fergus McNeill (Scotland), Denis Bracken (Canada) and Alan Clarke (Wales) also cross the disciplines of social

work (McNeill and Bracken) and social policy (Clarke). They present compelling arguments for desistance research and address the need for effective interventions and studies on effectiveness. They examine traditional program evaluation studies against the backdrop of desistance research and argue for approaches that can be tailored to the individual needs and attributes of offenders.

The *Handbook* closes with reflections from three of the editors on the connections and disconnections between research domains in social work. These highlight a dynamically changing picture of social work research, but one that is in the main positive. Writers covering diverse fields identify challenges in methodological developments that have to address multi-disciplinary approaches and be meaningful to multi-professional working. The need for more culturally inclusive research is cited along with more cross-national studies. Other challenges include the demands of policy makers and funders, and the readiness of the workforce to embrace research agendas. However overall there is a sense of robustness in both the nature of the research being undertaken, and social work's ability to respond to the challenges.

DEVELOPING AND WRITING THE TEXT

The reading and navigating of the *Handbook* may be facilitated if we say a little about how we organized the project. The overall direction of the project lay with the editors. Editorial collaboration has been marked by a strong collegiality with extended periods of face-to-face work and audio conferencing. In addition we worked in close collaboration with an international Advisory Board appointed by the publishers. The role of the Board included giving guidance and advice on the purpose, structure and content of the project; advising on contributors; and acting as editorial readers of chapter drafts. This last proved the most significant.¹⁸

The *Handbook* contributors are in most cases in university posts. While they have been asked to cultivate responsiveness to the research perspectives of policy makers, service user researchers, and practitioners (and no doubt in several cases do not see themselves as occupying a solely academic role), the project has been academic-led. The contributions have been subject to demanding standards of peer review. We divided responsibility for each chapter such that each of us acted as lead editor for a quarter of the chapters, and each chapter had a linked Board member who was asked to review the drafts in the role of an intelligent general reader rather than as a specialist in the area covered by the chapter.

Although a minority of chapters are single authored, the great majority are co-authored. The nature of this collaborative writing is unusual. Of the twenty-nine chapters at least fourteen involve newly minted collaborations, and in most of those cases the writers were personally unknown to each other prior to this venture. In each case this has required exchange and negotiation by writers. Given that in most cases they are also domiciled in different countries, the demands of writing have been stringent. Numerous times we have been told by writers that the task of writing has proved very demanding. This is as we hoped. We were determined to avoid established senior academic writing partners producing the latest version of a familiar overview of their field. There are over sixty different people involved in this project, from twelve different countries. The Project Board included senior advisors from fourteen countries.

The form of collaboration was left to writers. If there is a lead writer the pattern of collaboration ranges from a second or third writer acting as resource consultant to the lead writer to full sharing in the development and writing of the chapter. These collaborations were partly a way of operationalizing our vision for the project and partly a reflection of the fact that the breadth and scope of almost all chapters made it overly demanding for one writer to cover the ground.

Consistent with our views regarding the relationship between social work and other fields and disciplines, there is a significant interdisciplinary dimension within the *Handbook*. There are perhaps half a dozen writers who would not regard themselves as social work researchers, plus two or three of the Board. We have asked all contributors to draw on key ideas from other intellectual traditions, in relation, for example, to knowledge, theory, practice, welfare, wellbeing, technology, health, care, social justice, language, culture, communication, time, place and community.

We asked lead writers to prepare a chapter abstract within two months of agreeing to take on the work. The lead editor, usually in consultation with the co-editors, provided detailed feedback on the abstract. Part of our reason for this was to ensure that the principles of coherence and comprehensiveness were met. On receipt of the first chapter draft, the linked Board member was asked to provide a full review and to suggest how the revision should proceed. The lead editor also reviewed the draft, and provided a consolidated feedback to the writers. We conducted this process without anonymizing either the chapter authors or the Board members. Contributors and writers were sent copies of the full file of writers and advisors.

One of the tensions in the project is that between the general and the specific. One of the main ways we endeavoured to manage this was through asking contributors, wherever it was possible, to include a number of exemplars in their chapter. These take a range of forms – a synopsis of linked research in the area of the chapter with the aim of lending greater specificity and grounding to the discussion; or the development of a model position on something; or a brief narrative of a key research experience. We invited contributors to exercise creativity in developing apt exemplars for their chapter, and welcome the diversity in how this dimension of the *Handbook* has been accomplished.

Each section of the *Handbook* includes a chapter that provides an overview of the

themes in that section, and a future look. We regard these chapters as crucial to the overall success of the project. We do not regard the synthesis chapter simply as a commentary on the other section chapters but as a chapter in its own right.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist, was among those who remarked to the effect that ‘Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future’. Bearing in mind that caution, the relative space we have devoted to different issues, here and through the *Handbook*, is the best indicator of the questions we believe to be important now, and which we anticipate will remain so for the foreseeable future. Newer issues and the differentiation and expansion of existing ones, can be provisionally identified. The challenge of faith issues may prove a major challenge to social work research. We touch elsewhere on the significance of developments in ICT and the Internet (e.g. in Parton and Kirk’s reflections on the growth of surveillance in the opening chapter, in Ruckdeschel and Chambon’s chapter on the uses of research, and in passing elsewhere in the chapters on community and on the intellectual contexts of social work research), though this is part of the research map that continues to extend by the day. The relationship of the state and social work research is not easy to anticipate. The discussion above of pluralism and diversity reflects the present predominance of social work research as a western phenomenon. The consequences of the world recession in the latter years of the first decade of this century may well see countries such as China and India emerge as leading economic powers that hence become significant in how the state/citizen relationship plays out in social work research.

As these social forces and forms take shape, who are likely to prove the ‘best’ – and ‘worst’ – scholarly allies for the social work

research community? We have produced a handbook that despite its originality has been written largely in the familiar scientific voice. This may not be true of future statements. There is an emergent interest in 'voice' issues in writing, and this is having a growing visibility in social work research, where social work may justly claim to be among the field innovators (c.f. Witkin, 2000, 2001; *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, 2007). Whether social work research hangs together as a field or discipline will be shaped by much that is entailed in these developments, as will the wider question of the future identity of social work as an occupation and profession. Yet it remains our modestly upbeat conviction that:

Science can be socially framed, possess political meaning, and also occasionally be sufficiently true or less false, in such a way that we cherish its findings. The challenge comes in trying to understand how knowledge worth preserving occurs in time, possesses deep social relations, and can also be progressive ... and seen to be worthy of preservation (Jacob, 1992: 501).

NOTES

1 The term 'domain' is used primarily in this *Handbook* to refer to the broad practice contexts and also forms of service delivery within which social work research often takes place. See Section IV of the *Handbook*. The term is used in the 'Global Standards' statement by IFSW/IASSW (2007), but does not appear to be defined.

2 We find it hard to resist offering Carroll's text from his *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*.

'That's another thing we've learned from your Nation', said Mein Herr, 'map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?' *'About six inches to the mile.'*

'Only six inches!' exclaimed Mein Herr. 'We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!' *'Have you used it much?' I enquired.* 'It has never been spread out, yet,' said Mein Herr: 'the farmers objected: they

said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well'.

3 http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/Postgraduate_Training_Guidelines_2005_tcm6-9062.pdf.

4 We are indebted to Synnöve Karvinen and Mikko Mäntysaari for pointing us to Finnish thinking and statements.

5 For an earlier, thoughtful discussion of social work research in an African state, see Brand (1986).

6 The framework was developed as a means of understanding social work research in universities. It has been applied without any apparent problems in a review and study of practitioner research in Scotland (Mitchell et al., 2008).

7 Mäntysaari and Weatherley discuss social work as a discipline or field (Chapter 11).

8 For an interesting example of a social work researcher wrestling with what she describes as the embedded culture of positivism in the face of her own varied practices see Fook (2001: 123–7).

9 We have been struck by the number of times Addams' role has been discussed by different contributors.

10 This quotation is from a recent exchange regarding the knowledge conditions for the emergence of sociology that bears reading in this connection (c.f. Baehr, 2008; Wickham, 2008).

11 We develop this point further in Chapter 15 in discussing the logic of social work research.

12 Chapter 7 has an example of politics and research from the Soviet era.

13 The phrase was Leon Trotsky's in his essay on 'The Fabian theory of socialism'. He concludes, 'Poor, wretched, feeble-minded Fabianism – how disgusting its mental contortions are!' Accessed at <http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/trotsky/works/britain/ch04.htm>.

14 Or possibly a collaborative or a co-operative.

15 This argument is developed in Shaw and Norton (2007).

16 On this occasion the Wikipedia entry is helpful.

17 In its strict philosophical meaning pluralism refers to a system of thought that recognizes more than one ultimate principle, over against philosophical monism. Pluralism in its primary uses seems to refer to the distribution of power in western society. See Cronbach et al. (1980) and House (1991) for illuminating engagements with political pluralism in its relation to research and evaluation.

18 We take this opportunity to record our appreciation of the indispensable advice provided for the project by the Board members.