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When we first responded to Jan Fook's call to form an international group promoting practice research (PR) in 2008, 23 people met in Salisbury, UK. In 2012, Ilse Julkunen and her colleagues organised the second conference in Helsinki and 150 people attended. It is a testament to the efforts of Irwin Epstein and his organising team at Hunter College, New York, that the conference has grown so much.

This third conference offered eight plenaries, 128 papers, 23 posters, numerous workshops and special interest groups, and was attended by 250 people from 19 countries. Importantly for the future of practice research, the conference identified 28 emerging Practice Research Scholars from 11 countries: Australia, China, Denmark, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, New Zealand, South Africa, Taiwan, The United Kingdom and the United States. As Mike Austin noted in his opening plenary, we are now large enough to consider establishing some kind of international structure to facilitate our meetings, and the organising committee is working on this for the next conference with Timothy Sim (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University).

Our increasing size and breadth matters we have been able to have a much richer debate of some of the core issues in Practice Research (PR). Certainly presentations covered a wide variety of relationships between practitioners and researchers, providing accounts of breaking down some of the barriers between these historically distinct activities. For example, there were a number of presentations by practice managers and practitioners about introducing PR into a service, generating evidence to inform practice improvement. In her plenary, Jan Fook made a strong case for equalising the relationship between practitioners and researchers: indeed she argued that the dominance of researchers in this relationship has led to a distortion in the reporting of practice. Similarly, Martin Webber's plenary showed the value of a genuine collaboration with practitioners to identify the areas where research could inform practice improvement.

The increasing critical mass of PR also allowed a new kind of bridge-building - with evidence-based practice via a broader, evidence-based perspective. As a leading advocate of EBP, Bruce Thyre noted that much of his most practice-relevant research could be conceptualized as Clinical Data-Mining (CDM) within a PR perspective, and that the conceptual and methodological divisions might not be as great as we have imagined. Indeed, several presentations explored the value of the Random Clinical Trial (RCT) of social media may be an additional important way of communicating, especially with practitioners.

Of course, PR is not without its struggles. In particular, many presentations identified the difficulty in building the infrastructure. This might be structural, in the sense that it concerns the lack of national policy supporting the training of social workers in PR, or the lack of national funding for PR. Or it might be in terms of the particular agency and the extent to which it provides resources to support PR as a means of quality improvement.

Despite the size of the conference, there are still some gaps. Only one presentation reported a PR project led by a service user, and we still have some way to go to ensure that their perspectives are fully included. For example, Alex Gitterman used his plenary to draw attention to the role of the relationship in making social work effective: what we then need is clear attention to the views of people who receive social work about the value of the relationship to them. Similarly, Rikki Savaya's fascinating account in her plenary of concept mapping the issues that influence practitioner engagement draws attention to whether people who use services might be allies in challenging some of the barriers to engagement.

As we develop PR, we will also need to give attention to the range of practice included in the idea of social work. Timothy Sim's plenary drew attention to the size and diversity of work being developed in China, which will clearly have a huge impact on how we think about PR in the future. A global framework for PR would also need to take account of the way social work tackles issues in social development and environmental sustainability. The kinds of research that might underpin organizing community resilience to deforestation or that tackles the impact of pollution resulting from large scale mining, for example, is not the same as research in services that address individual or family distress.

Some of these issues will be taken forward in the next conference, to be organised by Timothy Sim (stim@polyu.edu.hk) in 2017. Because of the strong links with mainland China, this conference will strongly reflect the diversity of issues that Chinese social work is addressing and take PR to a new level of global importance.

This note provides an overview of some of the key themes and issues emerging from this conference. In view of the size of the conference, it cannot be a summary, and if the reader would like more detail on the content, please visit the Face Book (https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Conference-on-Practice-Research/2014/306897222810246).

I look forward to seeing you in Hong Kong in 2017!