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Collaborative research and development: a typology of linkages between researchers and practitioners

Kooperative Forschung und Entwicklung. Eine Typologie des Zusammenwirkens von Forschenden und Professionellen

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ABSTRACT

Emerging discussions about research-practice collaboration in social work have sought to explore why collaboration and engagement are important. However, knowledge about how these collaborations unfold remains limited. The present study explored 17 collaborative research and development projects involving social work researchers and practitioners in the German speaking area (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). It aimed to capture the complexity of these collaborative projects by examining and describing the various forms that linkages between research and practice can take in social work. Data collection comprised document analysis and semi-structured interviews with researchers and practitioners involved in the projects considered. Data were analysed using open coding technique and the constant comparative method to identify emerging concepts and broader categories. This analysis enabled identification of five types of collaborative projects: Collaboration for i) scientific knowledge production; ii) the development of new procedures; iii) development of service organisations, professional practice and practitioners; iv) implementation of a specific practice; and v) support of political decision-making. Findings suggest that collaboration is influenced by the specific social welfare regime, cultural issues, as well as the configuration of, and dynamics between them in the projects.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Angesichts des vielfach konstatierten Theorie-Praxis-Gaps in der Sozialen Arbeit wird seit längerer Zeit die Kooperation zwischen Wissenschaft und Praxis als Schlüsselkonzept zur Überwindung ebendieses Gaps gehandelt. Allerdings gibt es kaum empirische Erkenntnisse dazu, wie eine solche Kooperation tatsächlich abläuft, d.h. zu welchem Zweck und mit welchem Inhalt zusammengearbeitet wird, wer dabei welche Rollen übernimmt, wer welches Wissen einbringt etc. Die vorliegende Studie untersuchte 17 kooperative Forschungs- und Entwicklungsprojekte im deutschsprachigen Raum (Deutschland, Österreich, Schweiz), um deren Komplexität abzubilden und die verschiedenen Formen der Kooperation

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zwischen Wissenschaft und Praxis zu beschreiben. Der Datenkorpus umfasste Dokumente sowie semi-strukturierte Interviews mit Forschenden und Praktiker*innen aus den untersuchten Projekten. Analysiert wurde entsprechend der *Grounded Theory* Methodologie durch offenes kodieren und fortwährendes Vergleichen, um aus den Daten Konzepte sowie übergreifende Kategorien zu entwickeln. Es konnten fünf verschiedene Typen von kooperativen Projekten identifiziert werden: i) Kooperation zwecks Erkenntnis; ii) Kooperation zwecks Verfahrensentwicklung; iii) Kooperation zwecks Weiterentwicklung der Organisation; iv) Kooperation zwecks Praxisgestaltung; und v) Kooperation zwecks politischer Entscheidungsfindung. Als Einflussgrössen in allen Kooperationsformen erwiesen sich die länderspezifischen Wohlfahrtsregime, kulturelle Aspekte sowie soziale Dynamiken zwischen den Beteiligten in den konkreten Projekten.

Introduction

The importance of linkages between researchers and practitioners for enhancing the translation and use of research in practice has been highlighted across a range of disciplines (Chagnon et al., 2010; Cherney & McGee, 2011; Crona & Parker, 2011; Nutley et al., 2003). 'Linkages' refer to the various disorderly processes by which researchers and practitioners interact and share expertise and knowledge for a specific purpose (Bowen et al., 2005). A central focus of research-practice linkages is often on facilitating research collaboration for the purpose of generating relevant and useable knowledge to solve complex, real-world problems. The assumption is that research that is produced collaboratively with practitioners is more likely to be used in practice (Heinsch, 2018). Linkage and exchange models have, therefore, focussed on describing the social processes that drive the movement of research into practice.

A number of linkage models and theories have been articulated, which depict varying levels of complexity and interconnection between research and practice (Heinsch, 2018). Two communities theory sees researchers and practitioners as living in distinct worlds, characterised by different cultures, languages, values, and interests (Jacobson, 2007). It proposes that collaboration between researchers and practitioners may be hindered by the gap between these worlds (see Amara et al., 2004; Bowen et al., 2005). The translation model also views research and practice as essentially separate spheres, between which a 'bridge' must be forged (Allen-Meares et al., 2005). It highlights the need to involve multiple constituents—consumers, researchers, practitioners and policy makers—in the research pipeline as a means of converting basic knowledge into practical applications (Hudgins & Allen-Meares, 2000). Other models describe research as a deeply cooperative process that takes place 'in the context of action' (Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008, p. 295; Uggerhoj, 2011). The hybridisation model proposes that, when research is conducted in practice settings, research and practice-based knowledge can become so intertwined that they combine to produce a third sphere of knowledge. Organisational theories suggest that collaborative efforts between researchers and practitioners are significantly shaped by organisational and contextual processes and routines, such as time and resource constraints (Belkhodja et al., 2007; Jakobsen et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018). In the context of such constraints, Bowen et al. (2005) and (Heinsch, 2018) emphasised the importance of the *quality* of an interaction, arguing this personal factor, involving attention to power and value issues, might be the crucial variable influencing effective collaboration and research use.

In social work, which has been amongst the slowest professions to take up scientific knowledge into professional practice (Gray et al., 2009), linkage models have been emphasised as holding particular promise for enhancing research use (Heinsch, 2018; Landry et al., 2001; Steens et al., 2018). Findings from a number of studies show that social workers favour accessible and immediate

knowledge sources, such as direct interpersonal engagement and consultation with colleagues, supervisors and other 'perceived experts', over repositories of textual empirical evidence (Avby et al., 2017; Fellmann, 2016; McDermott et al., 2017; Scurlock-Evans & Upton, 2015). Studies of engagement and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in social work have also found that linkage and exchange are significantly and positively related to the use of research by social workers (Chagnon et al., 2010; Heinsch, 2018; Landry et al., 2001). In fact, in Landry et al.'s (2001) study, linkage between researchers and practitioners was the only variable significantly influencing social workers' use of research. Findings such as these have led to increased interest in research-practice partnerships and engagement to address the long-standing challenge of research use in social work. Yet discussion in this area tends to focus more on *why* collaboration and engagement is important rather than on *how* it unfolds. Consequently, knowledge about how research-practice partnerships are developed and implemented in social work remains scarce (Steens et al., 2018).

Notably, some social work authors have opened up the 'black box' of their collaborative projects, to provide valuable insights into the 'messy but also very rich' processes involved in implementing research-practice partnerships at different levels and dimensions of social work practice (Steens et al., 2018, p. 12). For example, Steens et al. (2018) described their experiences of building an academic collaborative centre (ACC), a long-term partnership between a university in Antwerp and a social service organisation. The authors identified three important aspects of implementing research-practice partnerships in social work practice: i) informal contacts and knowledge brokering between key stakeholders; ii) working on a concrete research project; and iii) building a framework of mutuality and agreement in which differences can exist safely and negotiation can take place. Driessens et al. (2011) outlined a series of case studies from research projects with social workers in Antwerp, Helsinki and Trento. Focussing on the specificity of the research process in these projects, they described the benefits for research and practitioners and the conditions required to achieve satisfactory results. Key findings included the importance of i) involving diverse partners in every stage of the research process; ii) taking a bottom-up approach to constructing knowledge; iii) facilitating a sense of ownership of the research by participants; and iv) producing knowledge that is immediately available and meaningful for social work practice. Allen-Meares et al. (2005) offered an account of 10 collaborative projects between the University of Michigan and a range of services focussed on children and youth. Findings demonstrated the centrality of available resources and funding as well as the 'steadfast commitment on the part of a diverse group of partners', to the success of the projects (p. 39). These accounts highlight the importance of opening up discussion about the complex, multi-level and multidimensional nature of research-practice collaboration and engagement in social work. While they provide valuable insights into collaborative efforts in specific practice contexts, we believe, a broader classification or *typology* of key forms of research-practice collaboration is also important to guide research-practice partnerships.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to emerging discussions about research-practice collaboration in social work, by reporting on the findings of a study, which explored collaborative research and development projects involving social work researchers and practitioners in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. We aimed to capture the complexity of these collaboration projects by systematically examining and describing the various forms linkages between research and practice can take in social work.

In this way, we created a typology of key forms of collaborative research projects in social work, including the specific aims of these common endeavours, the ways in which connections occurred, and the associated interactions and relationships through which knowledge was (mutually) exchanged.

Methods

Our study used an exploratory, qualitative design and followed the basic principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Collaborative social work research ventures were identified in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. We searched literature databases,

inventories of funding agencies, project depositories, homepages of universities and academic units engaged in social work research, as well as Google and Google Scholar. Keywords entered were Sozialarbeit, Soziale Arbeit (social work), Sozialpädagogik (social pedagogy), Soziokulturelle Animation (sociocultural animation), searched in combination with Auftragsforschung (contract research), evaluation, and angewandte forschung (applied research), kooperationsforschungsprojekt (cooperative research project) and Verbundvorhaben (collaborative research). Collaborative projects identified through this search were included in the study if they: 1) included both researchers and practitioners in the research process; 2) reflected efforts to collaborate (defined broadly as any form of interaction between researchers and practitioners that allows them to exchange knowledge and resources for the purpose of generating new research); 3) demonstrated the use of research methods; and 4) were conducted between 2006 and 2012. Based on this criteria we identified 89 eligible projects. Project outlines and other associated documents which could be accessed publicly were archived. This constituted the sampling frame for the study.

Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2009) to ensure a maximum variation sample (Patton, 2002) we initially selected eight research projects that i) represented the different contexts of Austria, Germany and Switzerland and ii) reflected different forms of engagement between researchers and practitioners (for example, prolonged contact; distant, infrequent interaction; formal, structured collaboration; informal, personal contacts). In order to explore more deeply the complex processes involved in research-practice collaboration in social work, we selected a further nine projects, which documented more intense and close forms of collaboration that directly involved front line social work professionals. A content analysis of archived documents on all selected projects was conducted. Next, chief investigators from these projects were contacted to identify two key stakeholders from each project—one from the human service organisation and one from the research organisation—who were invited to take part in a face-to-face interview (n=34).

According to Swiss national law, no formal ethical approval was required for this research. However, potential participations were provided with an information statement about the research. All invited stakeholders agreed to take part in an interview. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to provide verbal consent for an audio recorded interview, and for the dissemination of de-identified findings from the interviews via academic publications and conference presentations.

Interviews were semi-structured and took a problem-centred approach (Witzel, 1985). Findings from each interview were used to inform and (re)shape the schedule for subsequent interviews. Interview data were analysed using a constant comparative method of iterative, inductive analysis. Employing Strauss and Corbin's (1996) grounded theory methodology, we created codes directly from the data using descriptions from or close to the data (open coding). Coding was guided by a series of sensitising questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1996): 'which people are involved in the collaboration?', 'which roles do they embody?', 'which aspects of the phenomenon collaboration are dealt with or left out? 'when, how long, where is the collaboration occurring?', 'why?', 'what strategies are used?', 'what are the consequences?' Building on these codes, we developed broader concepts (e.g. 'the roles of researchers and practitioners'). We then drew on these emerging concepts to write a case description or 'memo' of researcher and practitioner views of the collaborative project. This supported the development and clarification of the defining characteristics of each project. Where a case required additional contextualisation, we triangulated the interview data with data from the content analysis (Denzin, 1989). Following initial coding, we turned back to the full data set ('constant comparative' method); (Oktay, 2012, p. 70) to identify further characteristics and dimensions of the concepts we had identified, and consolidating them into 'core categories' (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 47). These categories served as 'dimensions of comparison' (Kelle & Kluge, 1999, p. 83 ff) across the projects in our sample (axial coding). Using these categories, we analysed and compared the key characteristics and dimensions of each project, and thereby agreed upon a set of emergent 'types' (outlined below). We defined a type as a cluster of projects that shared a pattern of similar—although not identical—characteristics. In developing our typology,

we sought a high degree of internal homogeneity among the projects included in each type, and a marked difference (external heterogeneity) between each of the types (Kelle & Kluge, 1999, p. 83).

Results

Sample description

The sample comprised 17 collaborative projects involving researchers and social workers from human service organisations in Austria (2 projects), Germany (5 projects) and Switzerland (10 projects). The sample included organisations from a wide range of fields, including child and youth services and shelters, juvenile justice, victim support, social welfare, psychiatry, health promotion and prevention, services for people with impairments, people experiencing poverty, migrants, sex-workers, and community work.

Emerging core categories

We identified five core categories that were central to the description of the collaborative projects in our sample: 1) the projects' basic arrangements, 2) the actors involved, 3) the relationship between the actors, 4) the output, and 5) the participants' retrospective subjective evaluation. Table 1 provides a brief overview of these core categories and their associated concepts.

Five types of collaborative projects

Our analysis identified five types of collaborative projects. We describe these systematically below using the core categories outlined in Table 1, to enable comparison. We have intentionally refrained from including interview quotes in our typology, as our typology conveys a higher level of abstraction that cannot be accurately represented by quotes pertaining to individual projects. Figure 1

Type 1: collaboration for the purpose of scientific knowledge production

The primary objective of type 1 projects was the production of scientific knowledge. While these projects had a moderate orientation towards application (the aims and the research questions focussed on specific social problems or welfare policy services), they did not include the development of a product or procedure to facilitate implementation and use in practice. While researchers and practitioners involved in these projects all supported the scientific objectives of the project some pursued additional and, on some occasions diverging, subordinate aims or further-reaching expectations of use. For example, some practitioners aimed to use of the findings to 'prove' the existence

Table 1. Core categories (axes) and concepts that emerged in the coding process.

Core Categories (Axes)	Concepts
Basic arrangements	General objective of the project
	Initiators
	Funding
Actors involved	Professional researchers
	Practitioners (on various organisational levels)
Relationship between the actors	Power balance
	Roles
	Proximity
	Formats of exchange
	Techniques
Output	Output (primary)
	Target audience
	Output (secondary; dissemination and use in the scientific community)
Participants' retrospective subjective evaluations	Challenges and barriers to collaboration
	Successes factors and facilitators

Figure 1. Complete matrix used for systematic comparisons of the projects: Axes, properties and dimensions.

Axes	Concepts	Characteristics						
Basic arrangements	General objectives of the project	Production of scientific knowledge	Development of (new) methods	(Further) Development of practice/organizations/practitioners	Development and Implementation of a specific service	Evaluation of a (new) welfare service/policy		
	Initiators	Initiative of professional researcher(s)		Initiative of a coalition of stakeholders from practice, science and administration/foundations		Initiative of practitioner(s)/administration		
	Funding	National research funding		Mixed funding from administrations, associations, foundations and social service organizations		Funding from social service organization(s)		
Actors involved	Professional researchers	University of applied sciences		Annex institutes		Independent research institute		
	Practitioners	Human service organization: front-line	Human service organization: management level		Private/civil association, non-governmental organization	Local welfare politics		
Relationship between the actors	Power balance	asymmetric		alternating symmetric and asymmetric		symmetric		
	Roles	complementary			interconvertible			
	Proximity	distant (low level of interaction, loose ties)			close (intense interactions, strong ties)			
	Formats of exchange	Steering group		Echo-/support-/advisory group	Formats based on mutuality (weakly structured)	Formats based on mutuality (strongly structured)		
	Techniques	Presentation/report	Discussion	Empowerment/training	Process control	Counselling	Organizational change	
Output	Output (primary)	Publication	Increase in prestige	Gain in knowledge/reflexivity/competencies	New procedures/Services	Change in practice	New networks and relationships	
	Target audience	Scientific community	Professional community		Administration	User/community groups		
	Output (secondary)	Uptake in scientific community			Uptake in professional community			
Participants' evaluation	Challenges and barriers	Divergence of goals/interest/claims	Lack of interest	Disappointment of expectations	Perception of science as a threat for practice	Staff turnover/changing membership	Communication problems	Lack of resources
	Success factors and facilitators	Convergence of goals/interest/claims	Benefit for practice	Trust	Skill level of staff	Communication style/navigating tensions	Attitudes towards acting and learning together	Adequate resources

of a problem to stakeholders in their service, or to support a future funding application, while researchers aimed to strengthen their academic track record.

In type 1 projects, researchers generally initiated the collaboration. All these projects were Swiss. Financial support for the collaboration was provided by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), which implied that researchers had to assume ultimate responsibility for the project. Researchers in these projects came from schools of social work at universities of applied sciences. Collaborating practitioners were from human service organisations in diverse fields, and included front-line practitioners, managers and administrators.

The research-practice relationship was characterised by an asymmetric power balance, as researchers held ultimate responsibility for the governance of the project. However, participants' roles were complementary: researchers contributed scientific knowledge and methodological expertise and facilitated connectedness with scientific systems, processes and funding. Practitioners, in turn, contributed their expertise, for example, concerning the practice-related problem and the organisational context, enabled access to the field and often made a financial or 'in-kind' contribution to the project.

In projects of this type, the relationship between researchers and practitioners was rather distant (direct contact was brief or limited to a few occasions). Linkage and exchange focussed mainly on the initial design of the project and on obtaining field access during recruitment, although researchers did make direct contact with practitioners when the relationship came under pressure and trust needed to be rebuilt. During data analysis and research reporting exchange was scarce. Discussions concentrated on intermediate reports or final findings, communicated through presentations. Practitioners were invited to react to output but were not granted a more active role. In some instances, this feedback led to minor revisions to reports. These types of collaboration often involved steering or advisory groups to evaluate the projects' progress. The main techniques used for collaboration were presentations and formal discussions.

Output from projects of this type generally took the form of research reports and publications in scientific journals. At times, researchers also presented the findings to other relevant stakeholders. In some cases, members of the research group used data and findings from the project for their doctoral thesis. Some practitioners felt that the results of the collaborative project contributed to a positive change at an organisational level. However, they were unsure whether these changes resulted directly from the collaborative project. Practitioners were not aware of a tangible impact of the findings on practice beyond their organisation, and had to speculate about the broader use of their findings in practice.

In this type of collaboration, participants evaluated their experience of collaborating positively when it aligned with their interests and goals. Collaborations were also perceived positively when the research team developed new insights and practitioners had an interest in the study outcomes. Major problems were reported, and practitioners' interest in the research project reduced, when methodological issues or decisions by funding agencies led to changes in the initial research endeavour. A mismatch of interests led to a reluctance to engage with the project, and a feeling that the effort this required was not worthwhile. To be successful, this type of collaboration required the development of trust by practitioners. Some practitioners perceived research on practice as a threat; they felt concerned that their investment of time and resources would not result in a suitable return, or believed that research was irrelevant and not useful. In these projects, the development of trust was facilitated by shared values and pre-existing ties between practitioners and researchers. A lack of continuity of the team due to staff turnover interfered with trust development and project engagement.

Type 2: collaboration for the development of new procedures

The primary objective of type 2 collaboration was the development of new procedures or tools for professional practice. Practitioners in these collaborations intended to implement the project outputs in their service. Collaborating researchers shared this objective. However, their specific intention was to build expertise and strengthen their track record in a certain domain.

As in type 1, these projects were initiated by researchers, and received financial support either from the Swiss national research funding agency or from 'Innosuisse – Swiss Innovation Agency'. Researchers involved in these projects were from schools of social work at universities of applied sciences, and collaborating practitioners were usually managers in human service organisations.

In these projects, the relationship between researchers and practitioners was asymmetrical. However, the power tended to be more balanced than in type 1; the research objectives were clearly linked to the needs of the service organisation, giving them a stronger position and more influence over the project. Practitioners from the collaborating services contributed to project management and were consulted as experts in their fields. Thus, to a certain degree, they exercised power in governance and interpretation. The relationship between researchers and practitioners in these projects was complementary, but also distant. There was a clear division of labour and project partners took responsibility for different tasks. Researchers were responsible for data collection, analysis and the development of new procedures. Practitioners provided practice-related input and feedback on the project output. To facilitate exchange among practitioners and researchers, most projects

formed steering or/and echo groups, which only met on a few occasions. Workshops were also organised to discuss intermediate results and output. As in type 1, the main collaboration techniques used were presentations and discussions.

Outputs from projects of this type consisted of implementation procedures and/or concepts informing organisational development in preparation for newly-developed courses of action. These procedures were described in texts, which were not only made available to the collaborating service organisation but also to the wider professional community. However, our data provided no conclusive evidence on the uptake of these procedures in service organisations not involved in the collaboration. Collaborating researchers used the knowledge and insights gained through the projects to enrich professional development courses offered by their universities. However, there was no dissemination of information to the scientific community.

Participants' subjective evaluations indicated that a shared interest in the project objectives was critical to the positive evaluation of the collaborative endeavour. In this type, convergence was not a problem as researchers tended to have a very practical orientation. Compared with type 1 projects, data collection was less demanding and less delicate (e.g. expert interviews were a frequent methodological choice, which provided practitioners with more control than other forms of interview and were less likely to be perceived as a threat). While continuity of the research team was important in this type, continuity of the *purpose* of the project and the *idea* behind the endeavour was more important than building trust among project partners.

Type 3: collaboration for the development of service organisations, professional practice and practitioners

The general objective of type 3 projects was the comprehensive development of human service provision. This included developments at the individual, team or organisational level, for example, by building professional competences to prepare professionals to implement a new practice, and by informing institutional change to support this new practice. Projects of this type were set against the background of a broader vision of the professionalisation of social work. Typically, they involved several practice organisations, researchers from universities and independent research institutes or annex institutes, and specialist offices in ministries or private, non-profit foundations or welfare organisations. Service organisations often formally applied to be included in these collaborations, with the objectives of further developing their service and gaining public prestige. Researchers in these projects had a specific interest in the application of research findings in practice, or in contributing to substantive advances in a a specific field of practice. Representatives from ministries or private, non-profit foundations shared an interest in the broader agenda of professionalising social work in specific areas, for example, youth work or violence prevention. A positive outcome of these coalitions was that bringing together diverse stakeholders from Ministries, research and practice facilitated alignment of project partners' interests, and a shared definition of project aims.

Initiators for these endeavours were coalitions/networks uniting actors from the responsible administration, human service organisations in a specific field, such as stationary youth services/shelters, and universities, independent research institutes or annex institutes of higher education institutions with competences in the specific field. Thus, in this type of collaboration, the project was often initiated by a conglomerate of researchers, practitioners and staff from ministries who shared a common vision.

In contrast to type 1 and 2 projects, these collaborative endeavours did not apply for research funding. Rather, they received financial support from ministries or private non-profit foundations taking part in the initiative, as well as from other welfare organisations or 'Innosuisse'. This type of collaborative project was prevalent in German projects due to its strong fit with the German welfare regime.

The architecture of type 3 projects, sometimes defined by the funding body, attributed project governance to the researchers. The fact that service organisations sometimes had to apply to participate in a project suggests these organisations had a genuine interest in the project, and considered

collaboration with researchers worthwhile for achieving a desired change. By selecting organisations for participation, the steering group could ensure appropriate resourcing and readiness for change from the outset. This contrasted with type 1 and 2 projects, where interest in a project and belief in its utility were not guaranteed.

While actors in type 3 projects came from diverse organisations with different purposes, all had social work practice and research experience. Often, the collaborating researchers had field-specific knowledge, and an intrinsic interest in the development of social work services. Typically, they assumed a multi-faceted role that went beyond conducting research (such as brokering scientific knowledge, instructing, counselling, facilitating processes, moderating discussions). Thus, in what follows, they will be named 'scientific staff'. Actors from the practice organisations, civil associations and non-governmental organisations, in turn, showed an interest in developing their professional performance. This mutual interest and appreciation was of key importance to the collaboration. Where these qualities were missing, participants reported problems in the collaboration.

The relationships between actors in these projects were characterised by a high level of direct contact and communication, often in the context of demanding or shifting research arrangements and varying symmetries—or asymmetries—in the power balance. The roles of practitioners and scientific staff were complementary and, hence, not interchangeable. Steering power for the projects was often held by scientific staff and a steering committee (including representatives of the collaborating social service organisations and Ministries), and projects were co-designed in line with the interests of the practice organisations and the needs of professionals in the specific field. Thus, practice organisations held a high level of definitional power. In contrast to type 1 and 2 projects, projects were carried out within the practice organisations, with intense and close exchange between collaborators. Collaborative work between practitioners and scientists usually occurred in the form of workshops, where elements of education, instruction, exchange and development were combined and intertwined. Following these workshops, practitioners pushed the process forward, working on concrete issues on their own.

The main output from projects of this type ranged from renewed and innovative practices and procedures or services, to paradigmatic shifts in the conception of social work in a specific field. The analysis showed that new instruments and courses of action were reviewed and adjusted during the development process. Scientists collected and analysed the experiences of collaborating service organisations, and published reports. On some occasions they produced handbooks on issues related to the research project, which were disseminated to the professional community. Where new research knowledge was produced the findings were also reported to the scientific community. However, this was not the case in all projects. Given the highly contextualised, applied nature of these collaborative projects, their relevance to the scientific community may be harder to establish.

Participants' reflections on these projects showed that a structured, practice-oriented process in which researchers engaged in active exchange with practitioners was pivotal to the success of the collaboration. Also important was prioritising the development of practitioners' competences and needs and facilitating meaningful exchange with them. This led to a good match of the interests and objectives for all participants. The analysis shows that practitioners' interest in the process, and their readiness for change, are important. Participants reported problems when these conditions did not occur—sometimes due to structural constraints. In turn, the collaboration was perceived positively when researchers were known to practitioners, and had a good reputation in the field, before the collaboration began.

Type 4: collaboration for the implementation of a specific practice

The general objective of type 4 projects was the implementation of a specific service. The project also aimed to produce knowledge of 'good practice' when implementing the service through observation and analysis of the implementation processes.

Projects of this type were initiated by independent research institutes, which, like those in type 3 projects, formed part of a larger network including professional associations and government

administration units. The common aim of these projects was to shape and further develop specific areas of social work practice, while empowering service users or target groups. The projects mobilised additional resources and support for collaborative activities, provided by responsible authorities, professional associations or non-profit foundations.

Scientists in these projects were affiliated with independent, practice-oriented research institutes or annex institutes. Practitioners were employed in service organisations. Some type 4 projects also involved service users. Actors in these projects had a symmetrical and close relationship, and their roles in the projects were interchangeable. As the projects aimed to inform practice, practitioners and scientist worked together in the context of practice to implement the service. In doing so, their functions often overlapped and were not easily distinguishable. However, scientific staff in these projects often contributed by, for example, drawing on their cultural and social capital to garner local government support for their project. They also contributed to the implementation process, for example, by facilitating community meetings or writing reports. In these aspects, the role of scientific staff was distinct and identifiable. These contributions did not form part of a formal division of labour. Rather, practitioners and scientific staff each did what was needed during the implementation process, irrespective of their professional profile or affiliation. Collaboration in these projects was largely informal with only a few structured activities were reported, such as planning meetings, workshops and conferences, organised in partnership and characterised by exchange and common action.

Type 4 projects developed and implemented new outputs and services for practice, providing new support systems for users. The projects also produced reports and handbooks to guide the implementation of these services. The broader professional community was sometimes enrolled to disseminate the service or offering. Further output included conferences which aimed to translate knowledge about 'good practice' to professionals seeking to implement similar services.

Participants' evaluations of the projects showed that mutual understanding between practitioners and scientific staff was crucial to the success of the project. Given the common aim of implementing a service or offering, tensions between collaborators did not develop. Projects were successful when scientific staff had excellent subject knowledge, were familiar with the field of practice, and had the capacity to communicate effectively with practice partners. Conflicts arose when collaborating partners held differing positions or approaches. Some practitioners also raised concern about the sustainability of a new service once the project was over.

Type 5: collaboration for the support of political decision-making

Projects of this type aimed to produce knowledge to inform the development and implementation of policy measures. These projects were closely related to the welfare state and, in contrast to the other types of collaborative projects, did not necessarily involve social work organisations. They were usually initiated by actors in the political arena, administrative units or organisations involved in the implementation of policy measures usually who were seeking knowledge to legitimate their decisions. Researchers in these projects demonstrated an interest in developing knowledge for a certain policy area and gaining knowledge for future project proposals. Funding was provided by the contracting authority.

Researchers in these projects were usually affiliated with universities of applied sciences or annex institutes. Practitioners were either employed by a welfare organisation involved in the implementation of a particular welfare state measure, or by the administrative unit of an authority implementing the political agenda. In some instances, service users and other key stakeholders participated, with the aim of contributing their voice and influencing the plans of the key collaborators in the project.

Relationships between researchers and practitioners in these projects were similar to those in type 1 projects. However, in type 5 projects the subject matter under investigation was more deeply embedded in political agendas and therefore had more potential to foster tensions. Actors in the projects maintained distance and their roles were fully complementary. Their relationships were

characterised by asymmetry. In contrast to type 1 projects, steering power in type 5 projects was claimed by practice organisations, actors from the political arena or the representatives of the administration. Touchpoints between collaborators were the research question, access to the field or population under study, and discussion about research findings. Actors' roles were clearly delineated: practitioners defined the subject and focus of the research and provided access to the field. Researchers took responsibility for the research methodology, providing insights into research process and findings as the project unfolded. The main format of collaboration was structured meetings. In some instances, workshops were held to discuss research findings. Techniques for exchange were presentations and discussions.

The principal output from these projects was research reports, which also included suggestions and recommendations for practice and policy. Use of the findings was at the discretion of practice partners. We could not identify a method of feedback to the scientific community.

The quality of collaboration in these projects depended on the ways in which the actors navigated the tensions that arose between political interests and the research findings. In our sample, collaboration was often rather conflictual. Researchers in these projects showed a strong orientation to the needs of involved service organisations. This sometimes led to the curtailing of methodological rigour and objectivity.

Table 2 provides an overview of of the five types of collaborative projects.

Discussion

Our analysis found that some form of knowledge exchange took place in all five types of collaboration. In type 1, 2 and 5 projects, this exchange was limited to presentations that reported intermediate research findings and a final discussion about findings or newly developed tools. In some cases, type 1 and 2 projects seemed to reflect a strategic use of collaboration; they facilitated researchers' access to 'linkage' funds and enabled service organisations to benefit from knowledge and resources they could not otherwise afford to commission. The nature of linkages between researchers and practitioners in these projects is reflective of the translation model, which views research and practice as essentially separate spheres between which a 'bridge' can be forged by strategically involving practitioners at particular points in the research proces (Hudgins & Allen-Meares, 2000). On the other hand, type 3 and 4 projects reflected intensive, mutually proliferating processes. Type 3 projects in particular were deliberately designed and organised to enable mutual interpenetrations between scientific knowledge and practitioner wisdom and 'know-how'. In these projects, we observed the unfolding of a truly 'intermediate' space (Von Wensierski, 2003), in which the relevance and structures of scientific and professional practice were respected, and in which output was shared with both the scientific and the professional community. These intense linkages are consistent with the hybridisation model, which views research as a cooperative process in which research and practice-based knowledge become intimately connected and intertwined (Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008).

Linkage and exchange between researchers and practitioners appeared to stimulate practitioner learning across all projects included in this study, suggesting that research-practice engagement has the potential to influence higher levels of practice development. In turn, linkage and exchange with practitioners enabled researchers to gain deeper insights into, and understandings of, direct practice. These findings support previous studies of linkage and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in social work, which found that linkages are significantly and positively related to the use of research by social workers (Chagnon et al., 2010; Heinsch, 2018; Landry et al., 2001).

Beyond knowledge exchange and learning processes of the actors involved, however, collaboration is contextualised in several ways. In what follows, we focus on welfare regimes, culture and relationship as central conditions of collaboration.

Table 2. Overview of the five types of collaborative projects.

Axes	Concepts	Type 1 projects	Type 2 projects	Type 3 projects	Type 4 projects	Type 5 projects
Basic arrangements	General objectives of the project	Production of scientific knowledge	Development of (new) methods	(Further) Development of practice/ organisation/ practitioners	Development and implementation of a specific service	Evaluation of a (new) welfare service/policy
	Initiators	Initiative of professional researcher(s)	Initiative of professional researcher(s)	Initiative of a coalition of stakeholders from practice, science and administration/ foundations	Initiative of a coalition of stakeholders from practice, science and administration/ foundations	Initiative of practitioners/ administration
	Funding	National research funding	National research funding	Mixed funding from administrations, associations, foundations and social service organisations	Mixed funding from administrations, associations, foundations and social service organisations	Funding from social service organisations/ administration
Actors involved	Professional researchers	Universities of Applied Sciences	Universities of Applied Sciences	Universities of Applied Sciences Independent research institutes Annex institutes	Independent research institutes Annex institutes	Universities of Applied Sciences Annex institutes
	Practitioners	Human service organisations: front-line and management level	Human service organisations: management level	Human service organisations: management level Private/civil association, non-governmental organisation	Human service organisations: front-line	Human service organisation/ local welfare politics
Relationship between the actors	Power balance	asymmetric	asymmetric	alternating symmetric and asymmetric	symmetric	asymmetric
	Roles	complementary	complementary	complementary	interconvertible	complementary
	Proximity	distant	distant	close	close	distant
	Formats of exchange	Echo-/support-/ advisory groups	Steering group Echo-/support-/ advisory groups	Steering group Formats based on mutuality (strongly structured)	Formats based on mutuality (weakly structured)	Steering group
	Techniques	Presentation/report Discussion	Presentation/report Discussion	Empowerment/training Counselling Organisational change Process control	Discussion Organisational change Counselling	Presentation/ report Discussion
Output	Output (primary)	Publication	New procedures	Change in practice Gain in knowledge/ reflexivity/ competencies Increase in prestige New networks and relationships Publication	New procedures/services New networks and relationships Publication	Publication
	Target audience	Scientific community	Professional community	Professional community Scientific community	User/community groups Professional community	Administration
	Output (secondary)	Uptake in scientific community	Uptake in professional community	Uptake in the professional (and scientific) community	Uptake in professional community	

Participants'evaluation	Challenges and barriers	Divergence of goals/ interests/claims Disappointment of expectations Perceptions of science as a threat for practice Staff turnover, changing membership	Divergence of goals/ interests/ claims Staff turnover, changing membership	Divergence of goals/interests/ claims Lack of resources	Communication problems	Communication problems
	Success factors and facilitators	Convergence of goals/ interests/claims Trust Benefit for practice	Convergence of goals/ interests/ claims Benefit for practice	Skill level of staff Attitudes towards acting and learning together Adequate resources	Communication style	Communication style/ navigating tensions

Welfare regimes and funding lines

The corporatist mixed welfare regimes in the German-speaking area (Lorenz, 2006) create a specific 'ecology' for collaborative projects (Lorenz, 2006, p. 51); opening a wide array of opportunities for building partnerships between researchers and services.

In Switzerland, where there is a strong liberal tradition, the state assumes a limited role in designing social services. Responsibility for initiating collaborative research and development projects in this context is left to researchers and social service organisations. However, the Swiss state does seek to foster applied research and supported collaborative projects through national research funding schemes to promote trade and industry. This funding approach tends to foster type 1 and type 2 projects, which are mostly initiated and led by researchers. Type 3 projects were less common in this context and Type 4 projects were not identified.

In contrast to Switzerland, Germany has an active welfare administration with a clear development agenda. In this context, networks are created and maintained between research institutions and service organisations in specific fields, creating a supportive foundation for funding small pilot projects that foster practice development. This context nurtures type 3 and 4 projects.

In Austria, which has a conservative tradition, we found no evidence of a specific funding mechanism to foster collaborative projects. Here, we observed examples of social service organisations procuring funding by themselves to develop their service or demonstrate their legitimacy to funding bodies or policy makers. This context seems to support type 3 projects. Type 5 projects were funded by the contracting state agency or service organisation. These projects aligned with all the funding contexts under consideration and, thus, did not seem to be sensitive to a specific welfare regime.

Our findings suggest that funding arrangements under different welfare regimes seem to create either opportunities or barriers to particular types of collaboration. They point towards the critical importance of organisational contextual factors, such as funding and other resources, in shaping collaborative efforts between researchers and practitioners and facilitating research translation and use (Allen-Meares et al., 2005; Li et al., 2018).

Culture

It is noteworthy that many of the collaborative projects under investigation appeared to be new endeavours, which were not supported by longer-term sustained collaboration between researchers and practitioners. This suggests that service organisations and practitioners dealing with practice challenges do not necessarily turn to scientific knowledge or partners from research organisations for support in addressing issues or questions. Participants' statements indicated that they could not draw on an established culture of collaboration, but had to build new partnerships to support each project. Communication turned out to play a crucial role in this process. For each project, the mode of collaboration had to be defined anew, thereby running the risk of permanently reinventing the wheel. For example, in some instances, collaboration was fraught by mutual stereotypes and a limited understanding of 'others' in the collaboration project. This finding supports two communities theory, which proposes that collaboration between researchers and practitioners may be hindered by the different cultures, languages, values and interests of the communities they inhabit (Bowen et al., 2005; Hanney et al., 2003; Jacobson, 2007). Of interest was that some researchers were able to find a common language and facilitate mutual understanding and acceptance of different perspectives, allowing them to transcend these cultural boundaries.

Relationship

Our study found that building a framework of mutuality and agreement, in which differences can exist safely and negotiation can take place (Steens et al., 2018), can be challenging. In type 1 and 2 projects, where researchers initiated and led the collaboration in accordance with their academic

performance goals, practitioners often had to be persuaded that the collaboration would be useful to them. In some type 3 and 4 projects, agencies had to formally apply to participate in the collaboration project, which automatically assigned researchers a leadership role in managing the project. This can result in a power imbalance that has the potential to interfere with the development of mutuality. It may also affect practitioners' sense of ownership of the research; an important element of successful collaboration (Driessens et al., 2011). Participants' statements also suggested that staff turnover during a collaboration might hamper continuity and ultimately undermine the project. Power imbalances and issues of continuity may require repeated efforts at re-establishing trust amongst collaborative team members. In this context, *quality* interactions that involve attention to power and value issues, might indeed be a crucial variable influencing effective collaboration and research use (Bowen et al., 2005; Heinsch, 2018). While a thorough analysis of the role of power is beyond the scope of this paper, future research in this area may benefit from the application of critical theories, such as those of Habermas (1968) and Foucault (1977), which draw attention to the importance of examining the motivations and interests that underlie knowledge, its production and use.

Echoing Steens et al.'s (2018) finding, participants' project evaluations showed that collaboration was more successful when researchers had an established and long-lasting relationship with a practice organisation, a common commitment to practice priorities in a given field, and a good reputation in that field. However, on the grounds of this study, generalisations must be made with caution. The search could have missed projects, the number of projects in the sample was small, the reported experiences occurred a while ago, and in the light of our own reflection on the findings it is important to keep in mind that the types of projects described above seem to be conditioned by their context.

Conclusion

The findings suggest it might be worthwhile to move beyond the umbrella term 'collaboration' to consider the various types of collaboration identified in this sample. In developing this typology, we came to understand that the development, operationalisation and maintenance of linkages and collaboration is strongly influenced by the specific social welfare regime, cultural issues, as well as the configuration of, and dynamics between, researchers and practitioners involved in the projects. In light of these findings, tensions and conflicts that occur during collaborative projects should not be attributed solely to the existence of a 'gap' between 'science' and 'practice' that has to be 'bridged'; context, culture and relationships too, must be considered. Reflecting on the high expectations often placed on research collaboration between researchers and practitioners, we suggest that these expectations and hopes will not be fulfilled automatically. From our perspective, more work needs to be done in articulating, in detail, the different types of research-practice collaboration that can occur and identifying specific measures that aid the success of these collaboration projects.

Disclosure statement

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