

Report on Transforming the Non-Profit Sector Learning Journeys: Practising Research

By Ruby Thiagarajan

One way to rebrand practice research should be: it is far easier than you think. Sometimes academic jargon is a put-off and increases the barrier of entry. Parenting, for example, is something that everyone is familiar with. That is a form of practice research in itself.

— Participant at a breakout session on Day One

Transforming the Non-Profit Sector (TNPS), a three-year partnership between IPS and Tote Board, hosted two online local learning journeys in July. From the conversations held during the TNPS Opening Seminar in May 2021, it was found that non-profit organisations increasingly engaged in research and would collect evidence to inform their programmes. However, their research interests vary and their capabilities were often uneven. TNPS aims to enhance the capabilities of non-profit organisations as well as support public-private-people partnerships. These local learning journeys were themed “practising research”. They sought to address the challenges and opportunities of running a research unit in a non-profit organisation and to explore the value of different types of research for various non-profit actors. These learning journeys were conceptualised as a form of peer learning, for non-profits to share best practices within the sector.

Day One

The first day kicked off with two presentations — one on a **research community of practice** and one on a **research special interest group**.

Ms Denise Liu, a researcher at South Central Community Family Service Centre, and Ms Elizabeth Chia, Lead Researcher at SHINE Children & Youth Services, started the session by sharing their experiences with their research community of practice, or COP. When the National Council of Social Services stopped funding in-person COP in 2017, Ms Liu and Ms Chia decided to take up the mantle of continuing theirs. They saw the value of the COP and decided to revive it in 2018. The two researchers also shared that COVID-19 had posed a challenge to their COP, due to the decline in interest in virtual sessions. However, the situation has also presented opportunities to adapt; the COP now has a virtual support group on WhatsApp that is equipped to

providing members with quick answers to questions about research through crowdsourced troubleshooting.

COP comprises researchers within social service organisations, including “lone ranger” researchers — individuals who are the only researchers in their agencies. This comes with a unique set of challenges such as interfacing with a supervisor and colleagues who are not research-trained, and managing research projects on limited resources. COP is a support group for researchers to address the challenges they face in the sector. Some of the topics covered in the COP include research clinics to address challenges in applying research methodologies to “real-life” settings, mentorship and career development advice for challenges in professional development, and access to training and discussions on issues with consent and other research ethics questions. COP also provides researchers with networking opportunities and the ability to share resources.

The second presentation was on a research special interest group (SIG), and was delivered by Mr Martin Chok. SIG was started in a seminar and work group on evidence-based practice in 2017, after Mr Chok attended a practice research conference in 2017 and recognised the importance of having robust discussions within the field in a Singaporean context.

One of the initiatives started by SIG was a “matchmaker’s project”. This linked veteran practitioners who were skilled in doing research with mentees who wanted to pick up more experience. The mentorship session was six months long and would help mentees develop their research proposals. The key distinguishing factor about this mentorship project is that it matched practitioners to practitioners. The research mentors were not academics but rather practitioners who had conducted research “on the ground” and were thus equipped to answer unique questions about the reality of research in social service agencies.

In the breakout sessions, participants discussed the importance of having an expansive view of the non-profit sector. This would allow practitioners to learn from experiences outside of just traditional social service agencies. Some examples of industries that presented learning opportunities include tech open-source movements and start-ups. Artists should also be a part of the conversation due to art forms like theatre and photography being used increasingly as alternative research methodologies.

Day Two

The first presentation of the day was from Dr Charlene Fu, Head of Research at the Singapore Children’s Society on the realities of a research unit situated within a social service agency. The organisation’s research unit adopts the R&D model and supports practitioners as they create effective programmes as well evaluate them. Because

research sits at the centre of the organisation's work, its practitioners are also involved in research so as to build a research culture in the Children's Society. There are internal platforms set up to facilitate discussions between practitioners and researchers and across service centres to share observations and findings. The organisation also communicates their research through public-focused lectures and publications and through publishing papers in academic journals.

Dr Roland Yeow and Ms Adrienne Sng from Boys' Town gave the next presentation on practice research. They shared their experience of turning Boys' Town into an organisation that prioritised practice research. This involved joining the research COP (mentioned in the first learning journey) and receiving research mentoring. Since its initial push in 2017, Boys' Town has completed three research studies over three years. They have established a culture of research similar to the Children's Society by having organisation-wide sharing sessions. In Ms Sng's words, this allows the organisation to "identify practice research champions" and empower them within the agency.

The final presentation of the day was from Dr Neo Yu Wei, Deputy Director (Capability Development) of the Social Service Research Centre (SSRC), situated within the National University of Singapore. Dr Neo shared her team's efforts to build research capabilities within the sector. The SSRC provides seminars, annual conferences, and various training programmes to help equip the sector with practicable knowledge and skills. Dr Neo outlined the various services available at the centre and extended an invitation to the social service practitioners present in the audience to engage SSRC on their research projects.

All four presenters shared similar perspectives on the challenges facing the sector with regards to research. Not having adequate resources was one of the main challenges identified. Rigorous research is both time- and labour-intensive, while social service agencies are often stretched in terms of manpower and funding. Dr Fu brought up the gaps in the levels of research expertise within agencies. While researchers might be more adept at methodology fundamentals like designing survey instruments, practitioners were more nimble at adjusting programmes to suit their clients. This might come at the expense of the rigour of the research design but was essential to the functioning of a social service agency. The conflict was a common challenge of doing practical rather than academic research. Another challenge was getting buy-in for research projects from management and practitioners, i.e., non-research staff. Finally, all the presenters agreed that research sometimes had too many institutional barriers for social service agencies. Dr Neo suggested that agencies shift their focus from research for publication in an academic journal to more public-facing goals. In the breakout sessions, participants talked about research publication formats such as podcasts, seminars, and newsletters. This would allow agencies to forgo requirements

like institutional review board clearance, which was cumbersome and difficult for agencies to achieve without external assistance.

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