Researcher Development in the Social Sciences: an ‘Extended’-‘Restricted’ Professionality-based Model

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THE ISSUE
Continuing professional development (CPD) is an established feature of all professional work, including that located in the higher education (HE) sector. I doubt if there exists a single higher educational institution (HEI) in the UK that does not run a dedicated staff development service department, offering an extensive programme of courses and workshops on an array of topics considered relevant to the developmental needs of its staff – particularly its academic staff. Yet relatively little of this provision seems to be devoted to developing researchers' creative skills and, by extension, research practice.

It is not so much on CPD provision that this paper focuses, but on the research communities that are constituted by so many researchers who evidently manifest little concern for professional self-development. Clearly there are researchers who do strive throughout their careers to increase their skills and competence; yet there are many more who do not. From my own experience of having worked for almost twenty years as a member of the educational research community, of having interacted with other researchers, and having read countless research papers, I suggest that a large proportion of researchers manifest the assumption that, rather like riding a bicycle, research skills, once mastered, require no refinement. Earning a doctorate – or if not that then one’s first research project – is often considered and accepted as a professional developmental rite of passage that equips one sufficiently well for the entirety of a research or research-focused career: a research expertise-related qualification that retains its validity throughout a working life span. What appears generally to be missing from the consciousness of many researchers is a commitment to – or perhaps, in many cases, simply an awareness of the necessity of – developing continually as a researcher. It is very difficult to substantiate my suggestion that this is the case, since evidence of its being so is elusive. Human nature being as it is, researchers are unlikely to identify themselves as being unconcerned or complacent about their professional development, either because they are unaware of, or because they do not wish to admit to, being so, and I have no reliable research-based evidence to support my impressions. Yet I am evidently not alone in believing that a great many fall into what may be identified as under-developed. It is from evaluations of the quality of research in the field, as judged by its output, that I draw my evidence. This evidence appears across the social sciences.

Many of the shortcomings identified evidently stem from lack of rigour and, more specifically, theory generation.Valsiner, for example, promoting the journal that he edits, derides the culture of nontheoreticism that he perceives to be prevalent within his research community: ‘Culture & Psychology is not another journal for publishing merely empirical papers … It is a journal where the contributors are expected to make explicit their underlying theory of the systemic functioning of culture in psychological phenomena’ (p. 10, original emphasis). He continues: ‘In sum, Culture & Psychology encourages rigorous work at the intersection of the

1 I use the term ‘researcher’ in the context of this paper to refer both to academics for whom research is, or is intended to be, a component of their work and of their contractual responsibilities, and to those employed in research only roles.
theoretical and empirical realms of psychology. Such rigor could be glimpsed in psychology in the past, but has become displaced over recent decades by the social proliferation of the “empire of chance”.’ (Valsiner, 2001, p. 10)

Similar criticisms have been levelled at other subject research communities, including education (e.g. Bridges, 1998, p. 85; Gorard, 2004; Gray, 1998, p. 23; Griffiths, 1998; McIntyre and McIntyre 1999; Ranson, 1998) and sociology (Freidson, 1994), as well as social science research in general (Gorard, 2004; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Moreover, a specific component of rigour, conceptual clarity, as I have suggested elsewhere (Evans, 1997; 2002a), appears to be a neglected feature of much current social science research, creating deficiencies that others have identified in relation to their own areas of study (Donnelly, 2000; Freidson, 1994; Mumford, 1972; Nias, 1989; Thomas, 1997; Toomela, 2003, p. 35). The essential problem is summed up by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC):

(T)here is concern that social science research in the UK, however conceptually sophisticated, can lack methodological rigour...there is also concern that there is an acute shortage of advanced methodological skills among the new generation of social scientists. (ESRC, 2001, p. 1)

The key issue, I believe, is more fundamental than the apparently very real problem of skills inadequacy amongst social science researchers – which, incidentally, I do not consider to be confined to the ‘new generation’ of social scientists, but to be prevalent, too, amongst the ‘old guard’. The key issue is the lack of a culture of developmentalism amongst researchers.

Fostering a culture of developmentalism

Developmentalism, as I interpret it, is quite simply a commitment to develop(ment): in the context of this paper, professional development in relation to researchers. Elsewhere I have defined professional development concisely as: the process whereby people’s professionalism and/or professionality may be considered to be enhanced (Evans, 2007; 2008), which – though it is likely to be revised in the future – remains, for now, an adequate definition for applying to the argument below. Professionality, though, since it is integral to the argument, needs explaining and expanding upon.

Professionality: from ‘restricted’ to ‘extended’

‘Professionality’ is a term introduced by Hoyle (1975), who uses it to identify two distinct aspects of teachers’ professional lives: professionalism and professionality. In 1975 Hoyle explained the distinction as being between status-related elements of teachers’ work, which he categorised as professionalism, and those elements of the job that constitute the knowledge, skills and procedures that teachers use in their work, and which he categorised as professionality. After extensive consideration and analysis, I have defined professionality as: an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which s/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice (Evans, 2002b).

In the 1970s Hoyle formulated two models of teacher professionality: ‘For the sake of discussion we can hypothesize two models of professionality: restricted and extended’ (Hoyle, 1975, p. 318). The characteristics used to illustrate these two hypothetical models created what may effectively be seen as a continuum with, at one end, a model of the ‘restricted’ professional, who is essentially reliant upon experience and intuition and is guided by a narrow, classroom-based perspective which values that which is related to the day-to-day practicalities of teaching. The characteristics of the model of ‘extended’ professionality, at the other end of the continuum, reflect: a much wider vision of what education involves, valuing of the theory underpinning pedagogy, and the adoption of a generally intellectual and rationally-based approach to the job. I use the term, professionality orientation to refer to individuals’ location on an ‘extended-restricted’ professionality continuum. Empirical evidence supports the existence of such a continuum within teacher culture (Evans, 1998, 2002; Nias, 1989), giving credence to Hoyle’s heuristic models. Professional development, then, since it incorporates (according to my definition of it)
enhancement of individuals’ professionality, involves progressing along the continuum from the ‘restricted’ to the ‘extended’ end.

Yet development that turns individuals from ‘restricted’ to ‘extended’ professionals does not apply exclusively to teachers. Every profession, I believe, has its own professionality continuum. There is a range of developmentalism within researching – the name I give to the profession2 of doing research, to distinguish it from research as an activity and a product. It has its ‘extended’ and its ‘restricted’ professionals. There are those who, as researchers, are considerably more developed than others.

The ‘restricted’ researcher, as I interpret the term, parallels the ‘restricted’ teacher in many respects, and the point is that teachers who may be categorised as ‘restricted’ professionals are by no means necessarily – (though, in some cases, they may be) - ‘bad’ or ‘ineffective’ practitioners. They typically lack vision – or, more precisely, their vision is narrow - they are generally accepting, rather than critical, of their own practice, which results in their often resisting change and innovation; they are uninterested in intellectualising about their practice, and they are, for the most part, unconcerned about wider educational and social issues that lie outside the sphere of their own, classroom-bound perspectives and experience. Despite their deficiencies they may often be - though some of them are not - very conscientious, caring, hard-working, committed, efficient in their organisation and delivery of their work, meticulous in their planning, and successful in meeting targets and achieving objectives.

So it is, I believe, with those researchers whom I categorise as ‘restricted’ professionals. They may be very competent researchers whose knowledge of ‘text book’ methodology is comprehensive. They may be effective at delivering what is generally considered high quality research. They may be reflective, analytical and meticulously thorough in their execution of their studies, and they may yield findings that are informative and perhaps even transformational. They may be all this and still be ‘restricted’ professionals in relation to research, and the explanation for how this could occur is that these researchers would apply their intellect to substantive, rather than methodological, development of their work. Yet ‘restricted’ professionality also categorises researchers whose work has clearly identifiable qualitative limitations: researchers who are perhaps best described as ‘competent’ rather than ‘scholarly’. This latter category of researchers may (though does not necessarily) include those who have published widely – even prolifically – and won research grants. Their work, in some cases, may be (though is not necessarily) based upon sound methodology and the findings that they report may be (though are not necessarily) both reliable and informative, yet they fall short of applying sufficiently deep analysis to these findings to generate contributions to theory3. Provocatively, I suggest that far too large a proportion of the educational research professoriate falls into this category. This may also be the case within the wider social science professoriate.

Of course, it is entirely inaccurate to present an image of the social science research profession as dichotomised between two extremes: ‘restricted’ and ‘extended’ professionality. Since it is a continuum that bridges them, rather than a boundary line that divides them, there are degrees of either, and most researchers will lie somewhere between, rather than at one of, the two extremes. I have used the extreme of ‘restricted’ professionality simply to illustrate the issue upon which this paper focuses. For the same purpose, and by the same token, I provide below an indication of what the ‘extended’ researcher might look like, and, in addition, to illustrate better the nature of the ‘extended’—‘restricted’ professionality continuum as it relates to social science

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2 Whether or not research, in the sense of researching, is, or ought to be categorised as, a profession is debatable. Since length restrictions preclude discussion of this issue here I simply represent research as a profession, for the sake of advancing the paper’s main argument.

3 I refer here to theory as explanation that is universally-applicable of why and/or how things occur. This interpretation represents what I have called (Evans, 2002, p. 182) the ‘elitist perspective’ of theory. By this I mean perspectives that incorporate recognition of the status of theory as a much higher order form of propositional knowledge - and derived from a more rigorous intellectual process - than ideas, hypotheses, notions, hunches and structured reflection. I concur with Gorard (2004, pp. 23-4): ‘I realise that the word “theory” is used widely and loosely, and cannot hope to change that. I wish to distinguish the useful theory work from mere persiflage or worse’.
research, I follow Hoyle’s (1975) example and present in Figure 1 a heuristic model of illustrative characteristics of researchers representing the two extremes of the continuum.

It is the examining of processes and questioning of the bases of established practice that characterises the ‘extended’ professional researcher. The ‘extended’ researcher is reflective and analytical, not just about the topic of her/his research, but about the research itself. S/he adopts a developmental approach to research, seeing her/himself as a professional who is constantly striving to improve her/his practice and who therefore is continually scrutinising it for inadequacies and weaknesses which may be reduced or removed. The ‘extended’ professional researcher seek to increase and extend her/his research knowledge and skills further by keeping abreast of developments in methodology, or by contributing his/her own ideas for methodological development. At the very least, the ‘extended’ professional researcher is a career-long learner: someone who develops advanced research skills; at best, s/he is, in addition, a pioneer and innovator: a ‘methodological scholar’, who makes a significant contribution towards moving educational research forward. Such a person is what I refer to as an ‘analytical researcher’, but I emphasise that the word ‘analytical’ applies to the treatment of the research process itself, or to research-related issues, and is not confined to the treatment of research findings.

**Figure 1**: Characteristics illustrating the extremes of the ‘restricted’-‘extended’ professionality continuum in relation to social science research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The social science researcher located at the ‘restricted’ extreme of the professionality continuum typically:</th>
<th>The social science researcher located at the ‘extended’ extreme of the professionality continuum typically:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conducts research that lacks rigour;</td>
<td>conducts highly rigorous research;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draws upon basic research skills;</td>
<td>draws upon basic and advanced research skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fails to develop or extend her/his methodological competence;</td>
<td>strives constantly to develop and extend her/his methodological competence;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilises only established research methods;</td>
<td>adapts established research methods and develops methodology;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fails to develop basic research findings;</td>
<td>generates and develops theory from research findings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives research methods as tools and methodology as a task-directed, utilitarian process;</td>
<td>perceives research methodology as a field of study in itself;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applies low level analysis to research data;</td>
<td>strives constantly to apply deep levels of analysis to research data;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives individual research studies as independent and free-standing;</td>
<td>recognises the value of, and utilises, comparative analysis, meta-analysis, synthesis, replication, etc.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives individual research studies as finite and complete;</td>
<td>constantly reflects upon, and frequently revisits and refines, his/her own studies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>struggles to criticise literature and others’ research effectively;</td>
<td>has developed the skill of effective criticism and applies this to the formulation of his/her own arguments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publishes mainly in ‘lower grade’ academic journals and in professional journals/magazines;</td>
<td>publishes frequently in ‘high ranking’ academic journals;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is associated mainly with research findings that fall into the ‘tips for practitioners’ category of output.</td>
<td>disseminates ground-breaking theoretical issues and contributes to, and takes a lead in developing, discourse on theory.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**From continuum to development model: implications for creating a culture of developmentalism**

A continuum for which typical indicative characteristics are presented, reflecting professionality located at either of its extremes, does not constitute a professional development model; it is merely the framework for such a model. But, as a framework, it exemplifies professional attitudinal and behavioural descriptors that reflect standards of practice ranging from low to high. In the context of social science research, building a professional development model around this...
framework requires its incorporation and adaptation into research leadership and development policy and practice as well as all areas and strata of research activity. This may be achieved by adapting and incorporating the indicative typical 'extended' professionality characteristics into measurable standards and criteria used by, *inter alia*, journal editorial boards; conference, symposia and seminar organising committees; research funding bodies, including, in particular, the ESRC; job appointments and promotion panels and committees; and organisations awarding academic prizes. The 'restricted'-‘extended' continuum may be used diagnostically to formulate professional development programmes and research mentoring schemes, and, above all, if publicised within the social science research community and its separate subject communities, it may serve as a motivational yardstick against which individuals and communities may measure themselves and direct their self-development. It is by no means unproblematic. In particular, it is susceptible to wide-ranging subjective opinions about precisely what measurable activity or output may be considered a manifestation of each specific typical indicative characteristic: what one individual, for example, may consider 'highly rigorous' research may be considered by another to be nothing of the sort. Indeed, it is possible that such diverse interpretation may prevail between and within different subject-based and institutional-based research communities, rendering standardisation of quality difficult to apply. Yet it surely represents a step in the direction of creating a culture of developmentalism, which is so important for driving up standards of quality within the social science research community.

References


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