

Mixed methods to harmonize practical relevance and scientific rigor in practice-oriented research: example from the context of probation

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1) What is practice-oriented research?

Practice-oriented research is scientific research that is conducted with the primary goal to realize practical impact in relevant work fields. It shares with academic research the necessity to design and conduct the research in a methodologically sound way. It differs from typical academic research in the sense that academic research is on average more theory driven. The term "scientific" means that practice-oriented research, like academic research, has to conform to contextually relevant demands of reliability and validity. Accordingly, good practice-oriented research is research that conforms to relevant methodological demands and is useful to practitioners. Moreover, just like academic research, practice-oriented research should be in line with ethical standards. There is no single valid practice-oriented research method. Dependent on the research questions and goals an array of methods can be applied. In practice-oriented research this argument for methodological plurality is even more compelling than in academic research, as practice-oriented research is generally more context-specific. In order to obtain more clarity in the discussion on practice-oriented research, one can refer to Wolf & Rosenberg (2012) who, following Schön (1983), use the terms "scientific rigor" and "practical relevance". By rigor they mean the degree of methodological stringency, operationalization of theoretical constructs, objectivity of measurement and embeddedness in the literature and in previous research results. By relevance they mean among other things that the research applies to phenomena that confront practitioners, which they wish to influence and helps them to achieve changes. Accordingly, the research should also be linked to specific contexts and contribute to enhanced understanding by practitioners of their organizations, surroundings and jobs. In short, practice-oriented research should be conducted in a scientifically valid manner and be relevant for practice. Mixed method approaches help to harmonize these goals.

2) Mixed method example: the impact of professional values of probation officers on their work engagement

2.1 Purpose of the research and research questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate which professional values probation officers mention themselves as drivers of their work and how these are related to their work engagement.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Previous research (Butter & Hermanns, 2011) showed that professional values are important drivers of the work engagement of probation officers. Only it is still unknown which values are most important. Research has indicated that engaged employees are highly energetic, self-efficacious persons who exercise influence over events that effect their lives. This suggests that work engagement is important to enhance the discretion of probation organizations despite protocols and other routines.

2.3 Design of the mixed-method study

A qualitative study that can be seen as the "relevance enhancing part of the design" used in-depth interviews by a probation expert with 22 probation officers on the values they aim to realize in their work. In a quantitative study that can be seen as the "rigor enhancing part of the design" the open codes were converted to 6-point Likert scales (1 = totally agree, 6 is totally disagree). There were 4 open code based items per value construct. The items were administered to a separate group of 110 probation officers using an online survey. Also, work engagement was measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Using multiple linear regression, work engagement (dependent variable) was related to the value scores (independent variables), controlling for background variables like age, sex and experience.

2.4 Results

After transcription and analysis with MAXQDA nine value constructs could be distinguished: 1) care [.69], 2) autonomy [.60], 3) safety [.73], 4) recognition [.78], 5) participation [.68], 6) change [.72], 7) justice [.49], 8) reconciliation [.75] and 9) forgiveness [.74]. These are based on axial coding. Cronbach's alphas for the open code items per construct are in brackets. These results show that the higher order coding was generally adequate.

Example items are shown below.

- I contribute to society by keeping a difficult and sometimes dangerous group in line (safety)
- Despite the crimes they committed, I see clients also as persons who deserve understanding (forgiveness)

The regression analysis led to an adequate model ($R^2 = .36$) with safety and forgiveness as significant predictors of work engagement. Beta's are resp. .41 and .43 ($p < .01$). Assumptions are met. The effect size .56 is large.

3 Significance and implications

This practice-oriented study showed that a qualitative approach was essential to find practically relevant values and a qualitative approach was needed to measure them in a reliable and valid way. Safety and forgiveness (as measured in the study) seem important for probation officers professional well-being and long-term job success. Effective probation officers combine a focus on societal safety with a forgiving, non-judgmental attitude towards clients. These values seem essential to be able to perform in the probation field in a sustainable way. The other values seem more idealistic and their realization might be more dependent on the clients' attitudes. Finally, the results show that the used mixed method design enabled an optimal combination of practical relevance and scientific rigor. In general mixed method designs seem very promising for practice-oriented research.

References

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