Social Policy Research in Human Service NGOs

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As recently as 2001, Mark Lyons observed that most research in Australia was undertaken by government bodies and universities and that there were only a small number of third sector organizations, mainly in science and medicine, which conducted research (2001, p. 528). This paper presents research that was prompted by an awareness that an increasing number of human service’ non-government organizations (NGOs) in Australia are now more inclined to, and be active in, conducting research in-house to develop evidence or support for shifts in the allocation of resources or to influence policy decisions.

Driven primarily by a longer-term research question that will test the extent of influence human service NGOs social policy research has on social policy development, this paper focuses on the findings from a recent qualitative study that explored the emergence of research capacity within human service NGOs in Australia.

Borrowing from Gardner and Nunan’s distinction between research that is more focused on general explorations and ‘finding answers’ through the production of knowledge, and evaluation research, which is produced for more specific interventions that are applied to greater program effectiveness (2007, p. 337), ‘finding answers’ research was the focus of this study. Based on the distinction between evaluative research and ‘finding answers’ research, this paper explores the internal and external drivers that have propelled the significant growth in the research capacity of human service NGOs in Australia to engage in ‘finding answers’ research.

The study was chiefly concerned with questions about the extent to which such NGOs are conducting their own social policy research and with exploring possible external and internal factors that have led to this shift. Workers identified as ‘finding answers’ researchers in key human service NGOs across Australia were interviewed. The inquiry was based or exploring key factors that emerged from an international literature review of prior research on the relationship between research, per se, and the policy process. These factors included such internal changes in NGOs as, changes in core social change values within the NGO, changes in the embedded expertise within NGOs, and reaching a natural point in the evolution of the role of NGOs that created a research culture. Some of the external factors that were explored included, the growth in the value of ‘evidence based’ social policy development, increased across-NGO network research culture/dialogue, and increased potential for direct impact on government policy decision-making due to changes in the political context. This paper will present the findings from the research and place those findings in the context of wider debates about the role of the third sector and social change and the integral adaptability of such organizations in changing social and political contexts.

1 ‘Human service’ is this context refers primarily to the broad areas of poverty, health, welfare, families, young people and children.

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References


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