Moving Forward with Research in the Organizational Ombuds Profession

SHEREEN BINGHAM

ABSTRACT
This paper offers a perspective on the place of research in the organizational ombuds profession. It begins by examining the disparity that exists between repeated calls for research on organizational ombudsry and the scarcity of published, empirical research in the area. It then considers the historical evolution and obstacles that have deterred our development as an evidence-based profession. Finally, it discusses ideas for moving forward with research in the field and encourages critical reflection as integral to that process.

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KEYWORDS
ombuds, empirical research, practice paradigm, evidence-based practice

Introduction
Research is widely viewed as essential to the robust development and credibility of a profession. In recent decades, professional and academic leaders in fields as diverse as health and human services, education, public services, and business management have increasingly encouraged professionals to produce research to help identify strategies and interventions that best attain desired outcomes (Rynes et al. 2014). Some have even suggested that integrating empirical evidence into practice and policy decisions is becoming “an interdisciplinary professional standard” (Rynes et al. 2014, 305). However, fields vary in the extent to which they have produced bodies of research evidence that are substantial, relevant, and credible enough to be applied usefully in practice (Saini 2008).

Like other fields, the organizational ombuds’ profession has been conducting and encouraging research on our profession for many years. Ombudsry caucuses and associations began forming in the 1970s (Levine-Finley and Carter 2010), and we have surveys of ombuds practitioners on record dating back at least to 1982 (Rowe 1987). The International Ombudsman Association (IOA), which formed through a merger of two associations in 2005, has adopted an increasingly holistic approach to promoting ombuds research. The IOA strategic plans in 2008 and 2013 have asserted the value of research, the Journal of the International Ombudsman Association (JIOA) was created in 2008 in part to publish research (Lincoln 2008, 2011), the IOA published a research agenda in the Journal in 2009, and the board approved an IOA Research and Assessment Committee for development in 2014. Yet these advances have taken us only a few small steps toward becoming a profession that is...
Ten years after the IOA’s formation and seven years since the organization framed a formal research agenda, it seems time for us to reflect critically on our progress as researchers and how to proceed from here.

This paper offers a perspective on the place of research in the organizational ombuds profession, with hope of supporting critical reflection. As a longtime university professor and relatively new member of the ombudsry community, I offer my view with awareness that I have much to learn.

First, I begin by examining the disparity between our repeated calls for research on ombuds work and the actual research production. This entails reviewing ways in which the ombuds profession has been promoting research and showing that the output of organizational ombuds research has been sparse. Second, I consider factors that have deterred the production of research on ombuds practices in particular; I interpret the history of the field to illuminate why we have not yet produced more research, contrast our history with the rise of the evidence-based practice movement within other professions, and identify current hurdles to conducting research on our own. Finally, I share ideas for moving forward with research in ways that might help overcome our hurdles as well as sidestep some of the obstacles many other professions are struggling to surmount.

Where Is All the Ombuds Research?

ENCOURAGING WORDS

The current IOA strategic plan acknowledges the importance of research and asserts its potential to help advance the organizational ombuds profession. One can infer from the document that our profession recognizes the potential of research to: (a) contribute to the professional development and excellence of ombuds practitioners, (b) help increase “the understanding, visibility and development of Organizational Ombudsman roles and offices,” and (c) “support and influence policy-making” relevant to the profession.

IOA’s promotion of research is also expressed through its professional Journal. Since JIOA’s inception in 2008, its editors and authors have been advocates for ombuds research. Alan Lincoln, the Journal’s founder and first editor, wrote in the inaugural issue that JIOA would “focus on research and issues for and about the ombuds profession …” (Lincoln 2008, 6; see also Sebok 2014). In that first issue, the Journal published the IOA Universal Reporting Categories, which a special task force developed through research to help ombuds consistently track the issues we address and, in doing so, produce evidence that can inform professional practice and policy decisions.

In the years since, JIOA has continued to push research forward. In 2009, the Journal published a research agenda that the IOA board of directors had solicited. The agenda identified about thirty research questions organized under the topics of “the ombuds professional,” “the ombuds profession,” and “ombuds practices” (Lincoln, Rowe, and Sebok 2009). Two years later, under the editorship of David Miller, JIOA asked Lincoln to write an educational overview of the research process in which he defined basic terms and methods for conducting research, and aimed to inspire inexperienced researchers to conduct studies addressing questions in the IOA research agenda (Lincoln 2011). In that same issue, Miller (2011, 6) described research as “a crucial part of building an enduring professional foundation,” suggesting that studies may be used to identify repeatable ombuds practices we can critically evaluate and develop. Likewise, current JIOA coeditor Howard Gadlin wrote in the Journal in 2010 that “It is time to develop collaborative relationships with [academic] researchers … who can independently examine and assess the work that we do, the way that we do it and the impact that we have” (Gadlin 2010, 27).
MEAGER RESEARCH PRODUCTION

Despite the encouragement and advocacy for research within the ombuds profession, a number of scholars have noted that—although there is ample research on related alternative dispute resolution (ADR) practices such as mediation—very little empirical research on organizational ombudsry has been published (Harrison 2004; Lincoln 2011; Smith 2014; Witzler 2014). To assess the accuracy of this observation, I conducted two informal tests.

First, I ran an online search for scholarly (peer-reviewed) articles in major academic library databases for the period between 1965 and 2014, using the search term “ombudsman (and related words).” This search resulted in 1,556 articles with my search term in the title, abstract, or list of key terms. The list included nearly all the articles published in JIOA. Negotiation Journal and Conflict Resolution Quarterly also contributed heavily to the list, having published several articles by IOA members, including special issues on ombudsry in 2000 and 2014. To determine the number of empirical research studies present in these results, I further limited the search to include only articles designated as “empirical studies” (including quantitative and qualitative research), resulting in eighty-four articles. Perusal of these articles revealed that, in more than half of them, ombudsman is a peripheral topic rather than a central focus of the research. This suggests that, in the last fifty years, only about forty scholarly empirical research studies focusing specifically on ombuds professionals and practices have been published and indexed in the databases I searched. Of those, most were studies of “executive” (statutorily created) or “advocate” ombuds who receive complaints from—and serve advocacy functions for—vulnerable groups such as individuals in long-term care and nursing facilities (Adock 2013). The list includes fewer than a dozen empirical research studies that focus specifically on organizational ombuds; many of the studies came from university professor Tyler R. Harrison and his colleagues (see Harrison et al. 2013). These search results support the observation that published empirical research on organizational ombuds professional practices is scarce.

Surprisingly, even though the initial 1,556 scholarly articles included numerous JIOA publications, the short list of eighty-four research studies did not include any. This discovery led me to examine the twelve issues of JIOA published between 2008 and 2014 to determine the number and types of articles that appeared. In conducting this second test, I defined “empirical research” leniently: including any article in which the author described gathering empirical data (surveys, interviews, etc.) and analyzing it in some manner to address an explicitly stated or implied research question or hypothesis. I did not include articles in which authors only summarized and critiqued previous scholarly literature or quoted interviewees without analysing what was said. There were ninety-five articles in all, excluding two messages from the IOA president as well as the Journal’s special “Creative Issue” published in 2013. Based on my inclusion/exclusion criteria, there were eighteen research studies (19 percent of the total) including several in the Journal’s most recent issue.

Reasons for the Scarcity of Ombuds Research

This section reviews the history of our field to consider why one cannot find more published research on ombuds practices. It begins by reviewing how we developed into a profession with practices that are based on the authority of expertise and tradition. I compare our history to that of another profession, social work, which over time has become more reliant on empirical research evidence as a basis for defining legitimate practice. I also consider emerging signs that the ombuds profession may be ready to follow a similar path of change. Second, the section introduces the process of “evidence-based practice” and considers challenges that hinder professions from becoming
evidence-based, as well as some ways other fields are addressing these challenges. Finally, it discusses obstacles that I believe ombuds will need to overcome if we wish to move toward becoming an evidence-based profession.

AN AUTHORITY-BASED PROFESSION

Ombuds history. The literature offers rich accounts of the history of the organizational ombuds role (Adock 2013; Gadlin 2000; Howard 2010; Levine-Finley and Carter 2010; Rowe 1995; Shelton 2000). Here I briefly review that history to suggest how ombuds expertise became the basis for defining legitimate ombuds practice, minimalizing the importance of empirical research as a potential resource.

One of the striking features of ombuds history in the United States is that, during the early years, pioneer practitioners had to figure out for themselves—with little or no preparation—what they should be trying to accomplish and how they should be doing it (Levine-Finley and Carter 2010). Government ombuds offices in the 1960s were modeled on the “classical” approach, imported from Sweden, which had to be modified to befit the needs of universities, corporations, and other public and private organizations during the social turmoil and public unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s (Adock 2013; Howard 2010). It was not until the 1980s that most business, educational, and certain government agency ombuds were using forms of practice that came to be called the “organizational” ombuds model (Howard 2010). These ombuds were influenced by the rise of the ADR movement, among other forces, which shaped their practices related to confidentiality, investigation, neutrality, and judgment (Gadlin 2000).

These pioneer organizational ombuds often were acting in isolation and without shared understanding of what ombudsry entails, drawing upon their previous training and personal characteristics to invent and improvise their roles (Gadlin 2000; Levine-Finley and Carter 2010). However, as ombuds grew in number, they began to discover each other, connect informally as colleagues and mentors, share knowledge and experience, form professional associations, and write about (and teach each other) ways to handle issues and cases. These developments transitioned the budding profession into an era of striving to develop shared ethical codes and standards of practice. A major driving force of this period was developing a consensual definition of the ombuds role and consistency in practices in order to advance the profession (Levine-Finley and Carter 2010).

Once there were standards of practice in place that IOA endorsed, a shift in emphasis apparently occurred: from creating standards to enforcing them. Today, IOA has established membership categories and certification procedures that afford lower status to ombuds who do not or cannot declare full compliance with the IOA Standards of Practice (SOPs). Many ombuds perceive efforts to monitor and regulate ombuds practices as necessary to advance the field, particularly during a period in which our profession is still defining and distinguishing itself (Brubaker et al. 2014) and still grappling with others’ misunderstandings of the ombuds role and services (Gadlin 2000; Harrison 2007; Harrison et al. 2013).

Comparing professions. Other professions have similar periods of development in their history. Social work scholars Okpych and Yu, for example, describe the “practice paradigms” that have characterized their profession in the past century. The term practice paradigm, adapted from Thomas Kuhn’s concept of the scientific paradigm, refers to the fundamental ways in which members of a profession think about and understand “what defines legitimate practice” (Okpych and Yu 2014, 7). Okpych and Yu suggest that a practice paradigm “based on the authority of expert consensus and tradition”
arose within social work in the 1930s. During this era, social workers translated knowledge from casework into formal methods of practice, and they understood legitimate social work to entail “using expert-generated techniques that required formal training and credentialing.” However, researchers conducted few systematic research to assess the impact of these practices.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, social work experienced an “ostensible effectiveness crisis.” Several studies failed to find positive effects of social work interventions, sending “a shock wave through the field.” The social work profession was growing rapidly, government spending on social welfare had expanded, schools of social work were proliferating, and the knowledge and resources needed to support high-quality research in the field were modestly increasing. However, the political climate bred accusations that those in the field were wasting resources on social programming, creating “an intensified atmosphere of accountability” and heightened attention to effectiveness within the profession (Okpych and Yu 2014, 14). Social workers also had role definition concerns as they faced greater competition from other human services professionals. When faced with these challenges—increased accountability and competition, a strengthening capacity for research, and avid calls for evidence of effectiveness—those in the field initiated a new foundation for defining legitimate practice in social work. This new practice paradigm would assess the effectiveness of interventions based on empirical research evidence (Okpych and Yu 2014).

**Ready for change.** The ombuds profession is experiencing some currents similar to those that pushed social work beyond “the authority of expert consensus” as the basis for defining legitimate practice and toward a new practice paradigm. In an insightful analysis of trends in the field, Susan Kee-Young Park (Brubaker et al. 2014) highlights developments that I believe signal the ombuds profession’s readiness for significant change. For example, the IOA Standards of Practice, a pivotal achievement, have aided practitioners, grounded the profession, and may ultimately provide a rationale for achieving legal recognition of ombuds’ confidential communication with visitors (Sebok 2012, 40). However, IOA members engage in ongoing discussion about whether the SOPs need to be revised (Gadlin 2011, 2012; Noack 2014; Sebok 2011; Sen 2011; Ulrich 2013), whether they accurately represent and effectively guide current practices at the majority of our institutions, and whether enforcing them through IOA membership and certification restrictions is necessary or even appropriate (Brubaker et al. 2014).

These discussions have been occurring in the context of change and uncertainty in the social, organizational, and legal environment. The ombuds profession is growing rapidly and becoming more diverse, including an influx of practitioners with graduate degrees in conflict resolution (Brubaker et al. 2014) who may be more prepared to conduct research in the field. In university settings, recent interpretations of federal laws have produced new threats to ombuds confidentiality, necessitating efforts by some practitioners to defend their role within their institutions (Joyce 2014). Such changes foster uncertainty since “no state recognizes the concept of ombudsman privilege wholly as advocated [by IOA]” (Adock 2013, 16). In recent years, difficult economic times also have made some ombuds offices vulnerable to budget cuts and elimination, intensifying the aspiration to assess ombuds’ value and effectiveness (Newcomb 2010). Several JIOA articles have suggested strategies to assess and communicate ombuds’ usefulness and value (Biala 2013; Park 2008; O’Connor 2014; Rowe 2010; Schenck and Zinsser 2014), and a trickle of studies evaluating ombuds effectiveness or success have appeared in the literature (Bombin 2014; Harrison 2004; Newcomb 2010; Waxman 2011; see Harrison 2004 for a summary and critique of studies published before 1995).
In short, when reviewing the history and current state of the organizational ombuds profession and comparing it to the experience of another field with a relevant and longer history, it appears that we are approaching the fringes of a possible practice paradigm shift—a change in our thinking about what we do and our grounds for defining legitimate practice. Further movement toward such change would not expunge “the authority of expert consensus” (Okpych and Yu 2014) as a foundation for our field, but rather would displace it as the sole basis for determining what constitutes legitimate practice. Since its inception, IOA has acknowledged the potential of empirical research to support and advance the profession. In a recent JIOA editorial titled “Moving into Empiricism,” Miller (2014, 5) wrote: “The Organizational Ombudsman profession is increasingly embracing empirical techniques in furthering our understanding of who we are, how we work and what we may achieve.” The practice paradigm on the horizon for our profession may be one in which definitions of legitimate practice are grounded in empirical research evidence. If so, we should strive to acquire more knowledge of the path ahead so we will be better prepared to overcome any challenges along the way.

AN EVIDENCE-BASED PROFESSION

The “evidence-based practice” (EBP) movement, which was adapted from the medical profession (Sackett et al. 1996, 2000), calls upon practitioners to integrate three elements as a basis for assessing a case and deciding how to proceed in the circumstances at hand: (1) professional expertise, (2) the preferences and values of the individual receiving services, and (3) the best available research evidence (Gambrill 1999; Mullen and Streiner 2004). Using this approach, ombuds would draw upon their knowledge, skills, experience, and the IOA Standards of Practice; and combine these sources of professional expertise with the values, needs and expectations of the visitor; and consider rigorously produced research evidence to make practice and policy decisions.9

Though the ombuds profession may transition to an era that produces more empirical research evidence—and places greater value on that evidence—we have no assurance that this shift will occur. Nor can it happen quickly. According to Okpych and Yu (2014), after more than forty years of amassing a large body of evidence supported by rigorous research methods, social work still has not fully achieved its ambition of becoming an empirically grounded profession. In fields such as social work and nursing, which have long embraced the ideal that practice decisions should be evidence-based, it appears that most professionals do not yet consistently draw upon existing research evidence in making practice decisions (Melnyk and Newhouse 2014; Wike et al. 2014).

Many authors have written about this phenomenon, analyzed the reasons progress with EBP has been slow (see Mullen and Streiner 2004; Wike et al. 2014), and suggested research approaches that may facilitate progress (Jaynes 2014). The problem appears due, in part, to practitioners’ misunderstandings of how research evidence should be used. Practitioners also have voiced practical concerns, including the perception that there are not enough high-quality research studies on which to make evidence-based decisions, and they have described having neither the time nor the necessary training and skills to critically interpret and judge the quality of the evidence that does exist. Practitioners also express concerns that the available evidence is not always useful due to a mismatch between the contexts and participants often represented in academic research versus the situations and people encountered by practitioners in actual practice (Mullen and Streiner 2004; Wike et al. 2014).

Helpful developments within the evidence-based practice movement include two applied-research approaches that address some of the concerns about EBP that practitioners have expressed. With
origins in the 1950s, “action research” has recently re-emerged in professional fields such as health care, social work, and education (Huang 2010). Action research engages practitioners themselves in studying and influencing processes of change that affect them (Sullivan, Hegney, and Francis 2013). Professionals conduct research on their own practices, enabling them to gain knowledge about their interventions and develop practical solutions to the challenges they face (Miller 2011). In educational settings, for example, professionals such as teachers, school counselors, or principals might “gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” while conducting action research (Miller 2011, 5). With this knowledge, they can then enact positive interventions in the school environment and on their students’ outcomes.

A second response to concerns about the EBP movement is the advent of practice-based research, which involves collaboration between professionals and academic researchers. This approach starts with the information needs of the practitioners (Jaynes 2014) and assures that “the conduct of research and the generation of knowledge [occur] within natural practice settings” (Jaynes 2014, 226). This method increases the applicability of the empirical evidence that results from the research.

The ombuds profession can learn from the concerns about EBP expressed by professionals in other fields and from the research innovations that other fields have implemented in response. Such information can help us proceed with research in ways that attempt to circumvent problems others have identified. Yet, because professions differ, ombuds are likely to encounter unique obstacles and concerns needing responses tailored to our own circumstances. If we determine where we want to go and are aware of the challenges we may encounter along the way, I believe ombuds will be well prepared to weigh options and choose a productive path.

OBSTACLES TO OMBUDS RESEARCH
Although ombuds professionals are arguably well positioned to conduct research on ombuds practices, some obstacles hinder us from doing so. One of these is a shortage of time and money. Ombuds have heavy workloads, and producing high-quality research is time-consuming and demanding. Although gathering anonymous aggregate data about visitors and the types of issues they bring to the ombuds office is not uncommon, ombuds seldom are expected to conduct and publish empirical research. Nor is funding for research expenses a common item in the ombuds office budget.

Similarly, many ombuds have not acquired the knowledge and skills needed to conduct rigorous empirical research. Unlike professions such as social work or nursing, ombudsry does not have an academic discipline and major. Ombuds come from a variety of disciplines, and there may be little common ground in their education and expectations for scholarship. This condition may evolve as graduates of conflict resolution and related programs continue to enter the profession. Meanwhile, we do not have cadres of scholars and graduate students busily conducting and publishing research in the area of ombudsry.

An additional challenge for ombuds research involves ethical concerns that can inhibit the ability to solicit participants and obtain sufficient data to address research questions. One of these concerns occurs when the same individuals are asked to participate in multiple studies. Although the organizational ombuds profession is growing, it is still relatively small; as we conduct more research, the risk of causing research fatigue among participants increases. This phenomenon may help explain why some ombuds surveys have obtained response rates below 50 percent, which some methodol-
ogists define as minimally adequate (Baxter and Babbie 2004) because of the potential for response bias when response rates are lower.10 Small, purposeful samples are suitable for most qualitative inquiry, which seeks to provide rich descriptions and deep understanding of a phenomenon within a specific context (Creswell 2013; for an example, see Levine-Finley and Carter 2010). However, for surveys in which results are to be generalized to the ombuds profession, low response rates increase the risk that the nonrespondents differ from the respondents in important ways. Researchers need to demonstrate that a sample is representative of the population from which it was drawn before they will accept and generalize the results with confidence (Abu-Bader, 2011).

An additional ethical concern that deters research participation and data collection relates to ombuds confidentiality as a standard of practice. Because an organizational ombud’s communication with visitors is normally confidential, researchers may have difficulty obtaining approval to observe ombuds’ interactions with visitors in natural practice settings. Many ombuds feel it is also improper to disclose information about their interactions or interventions for the purposes of research. Some may perceive such disclosure as a violation of the SOPs and the visitors’ trust, even when identities remain anonymous. A related concern involves maintaining the well-being of visitors and the integrity of their relationship with the ombuds. People come to the ombuds office for help, and gathering research data could increase their distress. Requesting a visitor’s participation in research may also be viewed by some ombuds as introducing inappropriate pressure into the professional relationship.

Beyond the ethical concerns about participating in research, there may be reluctance within the profession to become a focus of study. Ombuds are not accustomed to having their practices closely scrutinized by outsiders (Gadlin 2010), and even highly experienced ombuds may be uneasy about what research might reveal.

Beneath these other obstacles is this fundamental challenge: the ombuds professional culture historically has not regarded research as normal and necessary. In contrast to academic culture, ombuds only sporadically turn to research for generating knowledge about our practices. When individual ombuds struggle with a difficult case, our custom has been to seek mentoring and draw on the spoken and written expertise of colleagues and the SOPs. We have not habitually turned to the empirical research literature, which is still too sparse to be confidently used to inform practice decisions. Likewise, when ombuds collectively face a problem or concern, the norm has been to address it through discussion and group decision making. As the professional community continues to become larger and more diverse, however, this practice may be losing the capacity to be sufficiently egalitarian and inclusive. This change may create a greater incentive to develop processes that integrate research methods and empirical research evidence into policy and practice decisions.

Increasing Organizational Ombuds Research

Here I offer four suggestions that may help us move forward with research in the organizational ombuds profession: (1) focusing on our crucial questions, (2) framing our questions theoretically, (3) conducting research in practice settings, and (4) supporting ombuds researchers.

SEEK ANSWERS TO OUR CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

A starting place for becoming an empirically based profession is to revisit our research agenda. The IOA research agenda provides a general framework that is helpful in showing a wide spectrum of possibilities for research. Our next step is to narrow our inquiry to focus on more specific questions
that are crucial to the profession. For example, one category on the agenda is “ombuds practices,” where we find the broad question “What strategies work?” This question is so open-ended that the prospective researcher is unlikely to know where to begin.

To initiate the process of focusing our topic, Creswell (2013) offers advice to qualitative researchers that I believe is useful for researchers using other approaches as well. He suggests we begin by reflecting on ourselves and what we bring to the research project. Who are we, what is our history, what are our ethics and political predispositions, and how do we perceive ourselves and others? What philosophical assumptions do we bring to the research endeavor, and what theories guide our understanding of the topic at hand?

With self-understanding as a backdrop, we are prepared to consider what we want and need to know in relation to our topic. We must determine the specific purpose of the study, our research questions, and the study’s rationale—why the research needs to be done (Creswell 2013). The research purpose may arise from a practical issue or problem, a theory, a deficiency in the literature, or other sources. Reviewing the relevant scholarly literature is helpful, at this stage, to learn what is known about the topic and identify any deficiencies or gaps in existing knowledge. We can ask what unresolved professional puzzles keep us awake at night, or what urgent or crucial problems are being discussed in the field. Sebok (2011), for example, identified dissonance within one of the IOA standards of practice related to neutrality (SOP 2.2). As described by Miller (2011, 5), Sebok asked at a meeting, “How do we reconcile Ombudsman neutrality with being ‘advocates for fair and equitably administered processes’?” Questions such as this one enliven the IOA research agenda by narrowing the focus to a specific problem or concern. Instead of asking “What strategies work?” our research question may become “What strategies can organizational ombuds use to effectively reconcile ombuds neutrality with advocacy for fair processes?”

Once we have articulated what we want and need to know, we can turn to research design: choosing a research approach and methods for gathering and analyzing data that will enable us to answer our research questions (Creswell 2013). For example, in our study of SOP 2.2, we could use a qualitative approach and interview ombuds about their strategies for successfully (and unsuccessfully) negotiating neutrality and advocacy for fair processes in specific ombuds cases—without asking them to disclose information that would reveal a visitor’s or organization’s identity. Our analysis of the interview transcripts could identify themes in the ombuds’ responses that describe their experiences with this issue and what strategies have been most useful in different circumstances, resulting in empirical evidence that might help inform practice decisions.

Alternatively, in a quantitative study of SOP 2.2, we could develop written or videotaped scenarios of ombuds interactions based on typical cases in which the ombuds needs to advocate for a fair process while maintaining neutrality (for example, an institutional process affecting visitors could be depicted as unfair). Several scenarios could portray the ombuds using different communicative approaches, and the study participants (sampled from a population of interest) could rate the approaches on measures of neutrality and advocacy. Another option for creating scenarios is to train individuals to serve as “simulated visitors” (Park 2008, 24) to present their issues to ombuds who are participants in the study. The simulated sessions could be videotaped to enable the researcher and other study participants to rate the ombuds’ communication. The results could identify the messages that are perceived to effectively maintain neutrality while advocating for fair processes.
THEORETICAL FRAMING
The incisive and often quoted assertion “Nothing is so practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1945) points to the value of theory to guide researchers in their study of the crucial questions of a field. Theoretical frameworks and perspectives provide unique lenses or points of view that can reframe our key issues and refocus attention on aspects of our questions that were not previously in view. As a result, theory can do much to spur researcher insight and creativity, and foster useful research on ombuds practices. The value of theory to explain and inform ombuds work has been demonstrated in a number of JIOA publications (for example, Bloch 2010; Hasson 2009; Moore 2014; Ulrich 2013). Theories from numerous disciplines—conflict resolution, communication, psychology, counseling, management, sociology, and many others—can also provide inspiring ground for the study of ombuds practices, stimulating and framing our research questions.

Relational dialectics theory (Baxter and Montgomery 1996), for example, can be used to frame our question about reconciling neutrality and advocacy for fair processes. This theory from the field of communication views interpersonal experience as inherently contradictory. Dialectics refer to the interplay of contradictory pushes and pulls in our interpersonal relationships: the dynamic tension between opposites, such as the desire for both autonomy and connection or both openness and privacy. The theory sheds light on how people struggle to make sense of experience, and how we continually manage and negotiate oppositional poles. When applied to ombudsry, relational dialectics theory helps us reframe the process of assisting a visitor as one in which it is normal to negotiate dialectical tensions such as the one between neutrality and advocacy. The theory encourages us to ask what the two poles mean to us, how ombuds experience the tension and communicatively manage it, and with what consequences.

CONDUCT STUDIES IN PRACTICE SETTINGS
An important lesson from the EBP movement is that research should be conducted in contexts and with participants similar to the ones professionals encounter in practice. This helps ensure that the findings of research are applicable in practice settings. Ombuds can conduct action research, discussed earlier, in which we study our own practices. Additionally, we can welcome academic researchers from outside our offices and profession to conduct practice-based research, producing findings that are relevant and useful.

Studies in which researchers observe and evaluate actual ombuds interactions with visitors through one-way mirrors, although controversial, may be particularly instructive to our work. Some of this research could focus on whether and how ombuds enact the SOPs during sessions, and to what effect. In a study of ombuds neutrality, for example, the researcher could observe interactions between ombuds and visitors during initial sessions, and rate ombuds’ statements on scales measuring neutrality. Researchers might also record sessions with visitors, allowing a researcher to do a detailed analysis of how the ombuds maintains or deviates from neutrality during different parts of a session.

Researchers could also examine variables such as types of visitors and issues, which might affect the neutrality ratings of ombuds’ communication. For example, researchers could assess visitors and ombuds on identity variables (such as gender and ethnicity), and examine how the types of visitors and visitors’ issues, as well as the identity match between ombuds and visitors, might influence ombuds neutrality. Visitors also could rate ombuds neutrality post-session, including short-term and
long-term outcome variables such as trust in the office, willingness to recommend it to others, and perceived effectiveness.

As discussed earlier, significant concerns regarding confidentiality, as well as nervousness about what research might reveal, pose potential obstacles to studies of ombuds work. However, confidentiality concerns are likely to be resolvable and should not become “an excuse for shielding ourselves from critical examination” (Gadlin 2010, 26). Each academic researcher is required to obtain approval from his or her institutional review board (IRB) before asking people to participate in research. An IRB’s mission is to ensure ethical protection of the rights and welfare of human research participants. This typically includes requirements that ombuds would insist upon, such as informed consent for research participation, participants’ confidentiality and privacy and their right to withdraw at any time, the removal of any identity markers from data that must be securely stored, and timely destruction of data when research is complete.

**SUPPORT FOR OMBUDS RESEARCHERS**

A number of strategies could be used to promote ombuds research and offer sustenance to those who conduct it. Approaches that are tailored to support and encourage individuals who have different levels of research expertise may be helpful. For independent researchers who are already experienced and knowledgeable, the profession could offer competitive grants as well as significant time at conferences and with computer technology to speak to the profession about their work. We also could develop procedures to help researchers obtain representative samples of study participants without overburdening any particular group of professionals. Such efforts could be made alongside calls for research by our professional Journals. *JIOA* could expand communication within and outside the profession to encourage submission of research articles, and perhaps strive to publish a certain number of rigorously conducted empirical studies each year.

Individuals with little research experience can receive IOA support through opportunities to become educated about research methods at our conferences and meetings. IOA could also develop workshops and short courses to train ombuds in how to be discerning consumers of research, enabling them to determine what research evidence is credible to be used as a basis for practice decisions and how it can be incorporated. Eventually, academic minors or graduate certificates in ombudscry might be designed within disciplines such as conflict resolution and communication, with research methods as part of the required curriculum.

One way the profession could assist researchers at all levels of expertise is by encouraging research collaboration. This could start with an IOA survey identifying ombuds’ concerns about obstacles to research, as well as specific problems and issues we believe need to be studied. IOA could also promote the formation of independent research teams, composed of individuals with complementary knowledge and skills, to conduct ongoing ombuds research. These teams could be multidisciplinary and could include academic researchers who are not ombuds themselves, working closely with practitioners who might not otherwise have the time and training needed to conduct research. Ultimately, a combination of approaches and strategies will likely be necessary to promote a significant increase in the amount of research on ombuds practices, both within the profession and in related academic fields.
Conclusion

The organizational ombuds profession appears to be nearing a crossroads. We have an opportunity to think critically about the future and what kind of profession we want to become. Reviewing the history and goals of other professions is helpful, yet the uniqueness of our profession calls for a path created from our own history, mission, character, ethics, challenges, and aspirations. We need courage not only to speak out about concerns (Joyce 2014), but also to ask ourselves difficult questions. I believe one of those questions is whether we are content to advance further as a profession without a substantial body of empirical research evidence to inform and support our work. A second and equally compelling question is whether we are willing to do what it takes to produce such a body of research evidence. These questions should not be answered hastily because moving forward with research will require the profession to change.

Ombuds tend to view the critical analysis of our profession as involving processes of self-reflection and communication with colleagues. In contrast, there has been a tendency to envision empirical research primarily as a tool for gathering information about ourselves that is validating; we have been less likely to consider empirical research as a tool that can facilitate our critical thinking and improvement. Yet a foundation for critical analysis of practices may be one of the most valuable resources a body of research evidence can offer a profession. Producing such research requires practitioners to open themselves up to scrutiny with awareness that the findings may not always show what they hoped for or expected. If the ombuds profession aspires to begin grounding our practice and policy decisions in empirical research evidence, there is a third question we must have the courage to ask: Are we ready and willing to benefit from what the research will provide?
NOTES

1. The International Ombudsman Association uses the word “ombudsman” to refer to the ombuds role but explicitly welcomes authors’ use of alternative terms. I use “ombuds” and “ombudsry,” because I believe in the power of language to shape meaning and am more concerned about the effects of such language choices than their origin or intent. Research across disciplines suggests that using the “male generic” form (for example, mankind, congressman) tends to conjure primarily male images in people’s minds.

2. The two primary associations that merged were The Ombudsman Association (TOA) and the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA).

3. Evidence-based practice (EBP) involves professionals in a process of incorporating research evidence into their practice decisions, rather than relying only on professional expertise and the values and concerns of those receiving service. I elaborate on EBP later in the paper.


5. However, research from a number of other fields such as mediation, psychology, organizational development, and counseling has potential relevance to ombuds practices.


7. Unpublished articles and articles published in journals that have been discontinued or renamed were not included in the available databases. For example, excluded journals included the Journal of Health and Human Resources Administration, which published many articles by Mary Rowe and other prolific ombuds authors. However, journals originating outside the United States were included, such as Infancia & Aprendizaje (Journal for the Study of Education and Development) and Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences.

8. At the time of this search, in early 2015, all issues of JIOA except the second issue of volume 7 had been added to the library databases.

9. Ombuds also need to respect the limits imposed by their institutions when making practice decisions. In the EBP model, skillful adaptation to one’s institution would be considered an element of “ombuds expertise.”

10. Response bias occurs when the survey respondents are different from the nonrespondents in ways that might cause the results to be skewed.

11. A sample’s representativeness can be established through probability-sampling methods or statistical techniques that compare the characteristics of the sample with those of the population to which generalization will be made.

12. IOA Standard of Practice 2.2 states, “The Ombudsman strives for impartiality, fairness and objectivity in the treatment of people and the consideration of issues. The Ombudsman advocates for fair and equitably administered processes and does not advocate on behalf of any individual within the organization.”
13. The definition or assessment of “effectiveness” would depend on the research approach and the methods used for gathering and analyzing data.

14. The qualitative researcher also could interview other groups and stakeholders within the institution to explore their experiences with the ombuds’ strategies and the effectiveness of those strategies.

15. Research may also be used to refine theories and even to generate new theories on ombuds practices, as illustrated in research using the grounded theory approach (for example, see Witzler 2014).

16. Relational dialectics theory would also be a useful framework for studying the paradoxical nature of conflict and how ombuds help visitors integrate polarities such as competition/cooperation, optimism/realism, and avoidance/engagement (Mayer 2015).

REFERENCES


