Foreword

ASSESSMENT AND EVIDENCE IN SOCIAL WORK

This book aims to guide practitioners in the complex endeavour to use assessment and evidence effectively in their practice. It achieves this by demonstrating how to explore evidence critically. Its authors directly examine evidence and its contribution to assessment in specific areas of social work practice. By doing this, they show how connecting research with practice requires social workers to infuse assessment and evidence into all of their practice. Assessment and evidence as a beginning or base are false friends, but as this book illustrates, assessment and evidence integrated with skill into every social work process are a rich resource.

Although assessment and evidence may promise a practice based in certainty and clarity, enabling social work to harvest benefits for its clients and agencies, it has been hard to realise these advantages in practice. This book explores assessment and using evidence in social work practice, both in general and in a number of specialised areas, and social workers might read it to find useful techniques and knowledge that will achieve successful outcomes. But any expectation of certainty in practice is illusory. There is a difference between knowing about something and knowing how to do something about it; the problem is connecting knowing about and knowing how in practice. The message of the book is that validated assessment methods and evidence always require a professional practitioner to make complex judgements in the process of finding knowledge and understanding and to use skill in taking action in multifaceted social situations and multi-professional services to achieve worthwhile outcomes. Using judgement and skill in social work involves professional education and personal development to hone their practice talents. But it is through detailed application of experience and repeated practice that talent for practice becomes an ability to intervene beneficially in social situations.

Just thinking about the general meaning of assessment and evidence, it is easy to see both why they should be important in a profession and also why they present a practitioner with complex difficulties. Assessment is the act of evaluating someone or something; evaluation implies giving a value to or making a judgement about them. Assessments are then taken forward as the basis for designing social work and service interventions. Evidence is information that has been demonstrated to be true. A profession professes; that is, it makes a claim that it has exceptional capacity to understand knowledge within its area of expertise; that understanding is then taken on to join with the assessment as part of the process of designing the intervention.

A professional practitioner in social work, therefore, claims expertise in understanding the social and an ability to intervene to produce benefits. If they are to understand the social, they will have to assess the circumstances that they deal with using information that is true and then act to generate beneficial outcomes.
It is easy enough to say this, but in looking behind the obvious importance of assessment and using evidence, some uncertainties emerge. Whose values and judgements are social workers applying when in making an assessment they evaluate or judge? Do they consider only the values that come from their professional expertise or do they apply values drawn from the society and culture in which they do the assessment? Perhaps they apply values that come from the client, or the client’s family, or community, or the social agency that the practitioner works in, or the policy requirements of the funder of that agency. All of these will have some relevance, so the practitioner will be balancing the values applied but in that case, how? Or does one set of values have priority; in which case, which set and why?

Knowledge from some of these sources may be only partially expressed or unspoken, and it may be in conflict with other understandings; for example, individual service-users, their carers, their families, and their communities may all have different understandings of what is needed in a particular aspect of professional social work that affects them. Different sources of knowledge may conflict; for example, an organisation’s aims and policies may not reflect all the opportunities available from the policy community or the guidance available to practitioners from systematic research.

Somehow, these different sources of knowledge must be brought together, and assessment is one of the most important sites of the reconciliation of social work’s complex sources of knowledge. Assessment has a long history in social work, although it has been known by other words, for example: study, diagnosis, problem specification, critical appraisal (Payne, 2009b, p. 172). There have been social work agencies with assessment as their primary role, such as assessment centres for children being admitted to residential care. More recently, a number of models of social care assessment have been proposed, such as individual programme planning for people with learning disabilities, financial assessment, or person-centred planning for older people and people with long-term disabilities (Payne, 2009a). Almost every theoretical system prescribing social work practice establishes an assessment process at the outset and then requires constant or recurring re-assessment throughout the interaction between clients and practitioners.

I have argued that social work research and scholarship increasingly question the role and methods of absorbing assessment and evidence in social work practice. Social workers, then, should not expect assessment and evidence to give them all the answers in a simple way. Nevertheless, careful, grounded assessment and assiduously analysed evidence questioned with critical acuity will enable them to apply their experience and skill in exploring the lives and social environments that they are working in, and this, in turn, will enable them to ask the right questions. In doing so, they can help their clients and the people around them and their colleagues in other agencies to explore and understand the issues that they are working on together and to make a better job of their shared practice. Assessment and evidence, combined with critical thought and thorough practice, as demonstrated by this book’s authors, gives professional practitioners the opportunity to fulfil the potential of their knowledge base.

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REFERENCES
