Chapter 17

Conclusion: Beyond Binary Oppositions in Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This chapter gathers together and synthesises the concepts used and developed throughout this book. These themes include the challenges posed for social work as a profession in relation to notions of rationality and scientific research methods when considering what constitutes “evidence” for social work practice. This critique challenges the definition and application of evidence to complex scenarios where there are no easy answers, yet the agency and systems seem to demand them from social workers. In response to these challenges, social work has developed expertise in the use of case study and action research methods, drawing from interpretive and participative epistemologies. Such research studies aim to give resonance to voices hitherto missed, marginalised, or ignored. To redress this marginalisation and to provide much needed balance in what constitutes “evidence,” narratives of service-users and their caregivers have become primary sources of evidence, which are used to guide social work practice.

INTRODUCTION

The range of individual therapeutic, social, and organisational policy and legal factors identified by the authors throughout this book constitute an evidence-base for practice that differs qualitatively from the evidence searching process in other helping professions. Whilst social workers draw also from empirical research derived from positivistic and scientific traditions to guide their practice, social work through its critique of itself and the socio-political and cultural contexts and structures that surround it reformulates the practice questions being raised. Social workers review the available sources to inform practice and synthesise these into an investigation of the manifold issues, systems, processes, policies, and experiences that inform practice. Evidence conceptualised in this way has a much broader focus, with the search for evidence for practice needing to be approached as a pervading “need to know” that arises from the experience of the work and is underpinned by the social worker’s use of self in the practitioner’s role, as well as personal and professional values...
and ethical principles. As a consequence, evidence-informed practice needs to be approached whenever the practitioner experiences a pervading sense of dissonance about “not knowing”. This experience of “not knowing” brings the practitioner into proximity with the ambiguity of gaps in existing knowledge and a failure to find a coherent base for practice. Such deficits in the state of the existing knowledge occurs across a range of fields and contexts for practice. These situations in practice include scenarios where clients fail to improve; where systems exist in tension; when information is compartmentalised and not shared across sectors; where injustice, oppression, poverty and marginalisation exist unaddressed; and where organisations fail to work to provide the baseline needs of workers and their clients. This dissonance of “not knowing” and of wanting to have the answers to practice questions exists at the interface of all these concerns across different fields of social work practice. Dissonance also predominates where an evidence-base does not yet exist, or alternatively what does exist does not fit, or is deemed to be inappropriate by the social worker. There may be some knowledge in the field of practice but the understanding is fragmented and the knowledge may not yet be synthesised in a coherent, clear, and integrated form to be applied to the practice issue under review. This dissonance is experienced by the social worker searching for evidence for practice on a number of levels that are interrelated, with each level simultaneously impacting upon the others.

Whenever this dissonance is present for social workers, liminal spaces (Myerhoff, 1982) are created to process and deal with the experience. Liminal spaces are actively created by social workers and other helping practitioners, such as counsellors and therapists, when there is a jarring sense of disjuncture between what is known and an actual situation encountered in practice. Within such spaces, social workers choose from and integrate a diverse range of evidence and searching techniques, including reference to personal and professional philosophies and theoretical frameworks, to inform their practice. I have described this process of social workers entering liminal spaces in my chapter about navigating evidence and elsewhere (Pack, 2013a). Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1992) describes how people search for meaning in new situations guided by what is already known. Myerhoff found that those Jewish elders who lived through the Holocaust to come to settle in a new land (Florida, USA) were jettisoned into an unknown zone. In this unknown zone, there is a testing out and comparisons are made between the old ways in the new environment to see if there is relevance. In a similar way, so also social workers are able to effectively create new meanings to be applied in a new context through narrative and relationship.

Whilst encountering situations in which new meanings need to be brought to bear, a process of reviewing past meanings and experiences in practice is entered. I now propose a model to bring together what is suggested by this framework to inform an understanding of how social workers search for and apply evidence to their practice.

PART ONE: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF EVIDENCE SEARCHING AND APPLICATION

Evidence-searching occurs on several levels that interact, hence the complexity of the notion of “evidence” for social work and the difficulty of promoting awareness of it through the identification of a linear step-by-step approach to guide this search and assessment of relevance to practice. Adding to this complexity is the eclectic nature of social work theory and its relationship to practice and the ambiguous position social work holds as a consequence of its development as a profession. Social work is a bricolage of ideas drawn from several different disciplines within the social sciences including sociology, law, psychology, cultural studies, and human development among others.