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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Evidence-based Social Work, A Critical Stance

M. GRAY, D. PLATH & S. WEBB

Oxon, Routledge, 2009

220 pp., ISBN: 978-0415468237, £23.99

Every so often, the publishing industry gets a boost with a mega-seller that sells in the millions and fills their treasure chests. We've seen it with Harry Potter, and currently see it with Stig Larsson's trilogy. Both are so successful that movies and merchandising follows. And although the market for scholarly communication is far smaller, in relative terms the whole area of evidence-based practice is clearly providing a similar boost for authors and publishers. It's not so much one specific author or book that is the mega-seller, but the whole subject area of evidence-based practice that generates a feverish wave of writing and reading. As such, any new book needs to clearly make a new point or introduce a new perspective if it wants to be noticed. So what would three scholars from 'down under' have that makes their book different from all the others on this subject? The blurb for Gray, Plath and Webb's book on the back cover promises us this new element by stating this is the first time actor network theory has been used to look at evidence-based social work. That is certainly enough to make us curious.

The first three chapters of the book serve as an introduction to the key concepts of evidence-based practice. This includes an introduction to concepts such as evidence (as different from practice evaluation!), the historical roots of evidence-based practice, the evidence hierarchy as well as the debate about this hierarchy, the 'gold standard' of randomised controlled trials and systematic reviews. All of these feature in almost all literature on evidence-based practice. Chapter 3 is more innovative in describing four difference perspectives that emerge from social work's struggle to come to terms with evidence-based practice: the positivist, pragmatic, political and postmodern perspective. The strengths and weaknesses of each are outlined. What we do not get in this first part of the book is an introduction to the additional element, the actor network theory. It's touched upon at various places across these introductory chapters, but not properly introduced to those unfamiliar with this perspective.

Having introduced most of the key concepts, the second half of the book focuses in on the diffusion, formalization and implementation of the evidence-based practice notion. In order to do so, Chapter 4 'goes global' and provides a *tour d'horizon* of the main initiatives in the USA, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. For part of the information, the authors draw upon data from the inter-centre network for the

evaluation of social work practice. In a footnote, they observe the network's website hasn't been updated since 2006. No wonder some of the information feels outdated, like that on the Netherlands, where I spend most of my working life.

It is at the end of this fourth chapter that the authors finally put some flesh on the bones of the actor network perspective, to unleash its potential fully from Chapter 5 onwards. This results in a rich description of how evidence-based social work developed in the UK and the role played (and still being played) by key persons like Brian Sheldon, key publications or events or key organizations like the Social Care Institute of Excellence and the Campbell Collaboration. As they say on page 117, they approach evidence-based social work as a crime scene, identifying the multiple actors, their motives and opportunities, to reconstruct how evidence-based practice transmogrified from an abstract concept into daily reality for many social workers. The authors make it read as if you're playing a game of Cluedo, hunting for clues. Of course, this becomes more complex and tricky as one of the authors of this book was at the time a UK-based scholar, and consequently this description may well be a biased one. Fortunately, the authors are upfront about this (p. 124), and as such this can be seen as an invitation for others to write their own account of how practice-based social work developed in the UK.

The description of actors and their interactions is followed up by an analysis of the implementation process of evidence-based social work, and the barriers to such implementation. This section touches upon issues like cultural factors, the dissemination of research results and the role information technology can play. The final chapter then takes the practitioner perspective, using two fictitious scenarios to illustrate how knowledge gets mobilized into action.

Overall, this book lived up to its promises, and did provide a new perspective on evidence-based social work. The actor network perspective is relevant for this area of work, and sheds new light on it. What I missed most in the book is some introduction to actor network theory itself; the book applies it, but the reader unfamiliar with actor network theory is left on their own to construct what it is about. Underlying notions such as *interessement*, *enrolment* and *translation* are used but seldom introduced. An introductory chapter on the theory, concepts and authors like Callon and Latour would have made the book even stronger; but perhaps that's a suggestion for an updated version.

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Toward Evidence-Based Practice: Variations on a Theme

JOEL FISCHER

Chicago, Lyceum Books, 2009

576 pp., ISBN: 978-1-933478-55-5, \$69.95 (pbk)

Since the early 1990s, different professional fields have faced strong demands for scientific proof concerning the effects of programmes and interventions. With the development in medicine as the departure point, such demands have become increasingly more pronounced in areas like physiotherapy, psychiatry, psychotherapy and correctional care, and more recently social work. This development is reflected in a vast production of books and scientific articles on the subject. A search at the online bookshop amazon.com (May 2009) resulted in 71,072 hits using the keyword *evidence-based*, and narrowing the search to *evidence-based social work* gave 972 hits, mostly books. One of the most recent books is *Toward Evidence-Based Practice: Variations on a Theme*, written by Joel Fischer, Professor of Social Work at the University of Hawaii.

It has to be clarified immediately that *Toward Evidence-Based Practice: Variations on a Theme* is a very unusual book, first and foremost because it consists of a collection of previously published texts of highly different character (articles, book chapters, conference papers and papers for doctoral courses), written over a period of almost 40 years. Thus, it is a kind of history book, not only about the development in the field toward evidence-based practices, but also about Professor Fischer's development: from newly graduated PhD, to a retrospecting professor in social work.

It is difficult to summarise the content of this book due to its heterogeneous character, and this reflects one of its problems. The book consists of 24 texts with a total of almost 600 pages. The chapters are chronologically arranged in four parts connecting to the four decades of the author's career:

1. The 1970's: Foundations
2. The 1980's: Building on foundations
3. The 1990's: Connecting the past with the future
4. The twenty-first century: Toward evidence-based practice

Within each part, the chapters are positioned in the order they were written during the decade. This structure demonstrates that chronological is not always the same as logical; a thematic structure would have been more adequate in this case. On the one hand, the title of the book can be regarded as accurate. Even if only the last chapter explicitly deals with evidence-based practice (EBP), it might be, with a generous attitude, possible to look upon the other chapters as mirrors of a development toward EBP. The rest of the papers deal with a number of themes connected to social work (e.g. casework, social workers' understanding of research, eclecticism, uniformity myths in psychotherapy, use of computers in evaluation). On the other hand, it is legitimate to wonder if there is anything that would not fit the description 'Toward Evidence-Based Practice' with such an inclusive approach.

The book covers a wide—perhaps too wide—range of themes that have occurred over a long period of time. Social problems have changed, the way we explain these has changed, and the way social workers think of and deal with problems has also changed over the years. However, some issues remain and in the case of Joel Fischer it

is above all his engagement for the importance of research in relation to social work practice, but also his passion for the idea of a systematic eclecticism. Fischer warned social work, in his earlier writings, against getting lost in too narrow-minded causal explanations such as some psycho-analytical ideas about the importance of early events as explanations to the individual's problems later in life: 'The caseworker who assumes their importance and searches for such events to attempt to give meaning or understanding to a client's current behaviour, is likely simply to be barking up the wrong tree' (p. 59, originally published in 1978). Fischer is constantly aware of the problems of advocating an eclectic approach since it can become a sloppy concept whereby 'anything goes'. In Fischer's version of eclecticism, the approach is based on the idea that a variety of interventive principles and procedures should be used. Even if these principles and procedures derive from different models that sometimes appear incompatible, they can be shown—when applied in intervention—to be successful in terms of outcome.

This focus on outcome indicates the importance of using interventions that are systematically tested, evaluated, implemented and retested in a fashion that gives an increasingly robust knowledge on how to design future interventions. An important dimension in Fischer's work is to build research into practice, mainly through single-case (intensive/practice-oriented) designs. Such designs are greatly concerned with setting up criteria for desirable change, having instruments and routines to document changes, and also evaluating effects of specific interventions in each case and comparing across cases.

The eclectic approach evolves into a working model, the PRAISES (Pre-intervention, Assessment, Intervention, Systematic Evaluation and Stabilization), that 'looks like a General Motors wiring diagram' (p. 258) and is a way to condense the systematics of social work. In a way it seems a bit contradictory to talk about eclectics in such a structured mode, but looking into the PRAISES flow chart reveals the many different moments when decisions between alternative interpretations, actions and procedures are made.

At the end of the book, Fischer connects his work across four decades to the present discussion on EBP. The properties of EBP are described in the final chapter (Chapter 21). The problems are manifold: the various definitions of the EBP concept; the criteria for when a procedure's outcome can be said to reach a reasonable level of evidence; the lack of rigorous studies in many fields of social work; and the willingness and competence to actually use EBP among social workers. Fisher is not sure that EBP is something new or whether it goes beyond what he already pleaded for three decades ago in terms of research-based social work, scientific practice or effective practice.

We read the final chapter, 'Evidence-Based Practice', as Fischer's attempt to integrate his previous thoughts into an up-to-date version of EBP. This attempt also reflects influences gained through cooperation with other colleagues, the co-authors M. Bloom and J. Orme. The EBP that is presented in the chapter is an integration of two different types of research: the single system design that founds an evaluation-

based practice and experimental and quasi-experimental controlled group design that are used to evidence-base interventions by researching what is most effective in each case. Bloom, Orme and Fischer propose that this amalgamation of two components in EBP is open to both art and creativity, and value-based actions. On the social worker level this leads to a 'scientific practitioner', who a) makes use of research and evaluations in order to use interventions that have evidence of effectiveness; b) monitors and evaluates her own practice particularly through single-case designs; c) is committed to keep on learning; and d) is committed to social work ethics and values. As in the previous parts of the book, a step-wise model for practice is presented, neatly linked to the older PRAISES model. This is symptomatic of the writings of Fischer, in that he constantly works on both the level of principles and the level of (recommendations for) practice.

Social workers and social work students have in this book a source of inspiration in how to develop their work into a more systematic mode. Unless they are interested in some of the more personal and partly obsolete contents of the book, they will, in other parts, find challenging thoughts about different ways to base their practice on research. A strategic reader might get enough information by accessing previously published journal papers directly from the journals instead of buying the book.

Social work is a complex activity. It is a bit doubtful to say that the approach that is presented in the final parts of the book is really moving toward an evidence-based practice, since the eclectic content and the openness to normative or creative values risks leading to a blurring of the systematic of the approach. Working according to Fischer's (et al.) recommendations will be a tough challenge for the wannabe scientific social worker; will she or he really know what produces effects in a complex intervention process—typical of much social work—when there are so many steps and alternative decisions?

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Understanding International Social Work: A Critical Analysis

RICHARD HUGMAN

Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

208 pp., ISBN: 978-0230219595, £21.99

I must admit that I was very eager to review this book, partly because I was familiar with the author's work and anticipated a well-written volume, and partly because having been involved in researching and teaching internationally in many countries and continents, I was looking forward, as the title suggests, to a fresh and critical perspective on international on social work. Two recent editorial tasks for *Portularia* (Martínez-Brawley, 2005, 2008), a Spanish social work journal—one on 'harmoniza-

tion' and 'convergence' in social work education in Europe following the Bologna accord, and another on language use and social work practice—had added to my keen awareness of the difficulties of defining social work practice internationally. In spite of the language of 'convergence' in social work practice and education, there are many areas where non-convergence and different paradigms are apparent. Many internationalists would have pondered whether a practice like social work, so deeply ingrained in culture and language can be conceptualized as a unitary endeavour, more reliant on 'universal' principles than on 'local' norms and structures. Social work, even in Europe, still 'presents a picture of disunity' (Lorenz, 2008). But I should not get ahead of the story, but rather move at the proper pace.

I was first struck by how Northern European, or rather Anglophone-centered, the first couple of chapters sounded. There is a sprinkling of references to dual language initiatives and to a doctoral program between Texas in the US and Mexico, but essentially, the writing is based on perspectives from the English-speaking world. But to give credit where credit is due, early in the discussions, the author states what I had felt through the first two chapters: that North/South relationships, or more accurately native Anglophone/non-native Anglophone ones, are seldom based on relationships of mutuality and equal-footing. The author suggests that many exchanges, particularly in universities, are such that those from the North can undertake research while those from the South are provided with 'Northern ideas and models of practice' (p. 31). With this observation, Hugman had hit an important chord. As a multi-lingual but US-trained social worker, it is a struggle to get away from exporting those models, welcome as they often are in university settings outside the US and valuable as they may be in their original terrain.

As the book develops, the chapters became richer and more nuanced, with Hugman introducing additional dimensions in international 'social work', different from those perused in the first few chapters. This relates not only to the discussion of issues around asylum seekers and refugees (Chapter 3), but also to sparse references to rural issues. However, these topics seem, in my opinion, somewhat incidental to the core of the book.

At the end of Chapter 3, Hugman eases the reader into progressively more interesting and challenging chapters and the central themes of the book. This progression starts with a well documented truism: that the recognition of the importance of cultural knowledge and sensitivity in practice is not enough because 'particular regions and their dominant cultures continue to also be dominant globally' (p. 53). Hugman then suggests that our analysis of social work issues is faulty because the issues themselves are grounded in forms of neo-colonialism and racism.

Chapter 4 opens with a reference to the statement of purpose of social work issued by a combined meeting in 2000 between the IFSW and the IASSW. Hugman focuses on well-being and empowerment and on the way people interact with their environment, within the framework of human rights and social justice. What is very useful about the chapters that follow is that the author leads the reader into

questioning whether these goals, essentially tied to values of a certain type of society, can be valid internationally and within the framework of different cultures.

Without a doubt, the lasting points I walk away with after reading this book are those contained in Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. In 2004, as the author suggests, the IASSW and the IFSW approved a document to establish global standards for education and training in the profession. The author makes it clear that the document and the process continue to be criticized from several standpoints, and reviews those criticisms. In spite of the many professional efforts to solidify and disseminate 'professional' standards, such standards can be questioned and cannot be said to be 'universal'. The author summarizes the criticisms levied and divides them into two useful types:

First, there are those who are concerned about the specific ideas that are contained in the global standards document. Second, beyond this there are also those who challenge the very idea that the universal perspective on social work education and training is either possible or desirable. (p. 107)

The second and most critical position is grounded on the work of Payne and Askeland (2008) with references to the critiques of Gray (2004, 2005) and Fook (2004)¹ who suggested an on-going 'professional imperialism' and a professional hegemony of the global North, a point with which I tend to agree (Martinez-Brawley & Vazquez-Aguado, 2008). However, the awareness of imperialism does not make social workers blind to the positives of professionalization and standardization as far as these processes enhance the recognition of social work as an international player. This is, of course, a truly pragmatic point of view.

Chapter 8, which is excellent, is a discussion of the ethical questions social work encounters from an international perspective. The author includes a discussion of how Nussbaum proposes to address the thorny issue of human rights by addressing human capabilities:

When we speak simply of what people are actually able to do and to be, we do not even give the appearance of privileging a Western idea. Ideas of activity and ability are everywhere, and there is no culture in which people do not ask themselves what they are able to do. (Nussbaum, qtd. in p. 133)

Finally, in the Conclusions in Chapter 10, Hugman makes the case for a meeting or engagement between universalism and localism as perspectives that define whether social work can be viewed as valid outside specific cultural parameters. Hugman re-affirms his belief that, if grounded on global people's aspirations for human rights and well-being, social work can offer some general lessons. He also concludes with a warning to professionals from the 'global North' to be mindful of 'what constitutes human well-being in different cultures because the movement of social workers and social work ideas still tends to be predominantly in the North South direction'. I agree with the critique that the social work profession, as we know it today, is embedded in modernist culture, and I must add—not as a critique but as a statement of fact—that it is reliant on the values and assumptions of an industrial society system of social relationships, on the paradigm of

modernity, on a belief in the principle of autonomy embedded in the welfare state and on an ethnography which is Anglophonic.

I recommend this book particularly to those who want to explore the challenging issues of internationalism and social work. I particularly recommend it to those who seem committed to spreading 'a gospel' without questioning whether the truths they carry have meaning where they are applied. Hugman has concisely stated the issues and dilemmas.

Note

[1] Full reference details for these works can be found in the book's bibliography.

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Introducing International Social Work

SUE LAWRENCE, KAREN LYONS, GRAEME SIMPSON & NATALIE HUEGLER (Eds)

Exeter, Learning Matters Ltd, 2009

144 pp., ISBN: 987-1-84445-132-6, £15.20

This textbook was written by a team (Jane Foggin, Natalie Huegler, Marelize Joubert, Sue Lawrence, Brian Littlechild, Karen Lyons, Vicky Price, Graeme Simpson and Janet E. Williams) of highly qualified social workers and experienced lecturers from UK with the aim to

[...] locate social work as and increasingly international profession and to explore some of the international issues and activities that social workers are engaged with their daily practice. (p. xi)

The potential readers of the book are expected to be primarily student social workers in their first year or level of study, and thus it is not surprising that the editorial team took much care to achieve maximum clarity and intelligibility of their publication. But experienced social workers will also be able to use this book, even for consultation or revision and 'to gain insight into the requirements raised within qualifying degree in social work' (p. xi). These requirements are exemplified by the popular definition from the International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW, 2005) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2000):

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (qtd. in p. xii)

This quotation from an IASSW document gives to the reader a clear idea about social work concerns and about the skills and knowledge base of qualified social work.

The book concentrates on 'models that are current in practice and transferable across settings' with the emphasis on enabling the students 'to achieve the requirements of the curriculum and develop knowledge that assist [them] in meeting the Occupational Standards for social work' (p. xiii). The introductory part closes with an overview of the content of the book, combined with a set of definitions relevant to the topics raised in the following sections.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters deal with general issues of international social work, globalization, and developing an international social work perspective. The next four focus on particular user groups: children, young people and families, people with mental health issues, and the elderly and people with disabilities. In Chapter 1, Williams and Simpson explore the definitions of international social work and explain why social work is becoming an international profession. In Chapter 2, Simpson and Lawrence develop the theme of globalization in its three aspects—capital, labour and knowledge—and explain how globalization influences people's lives in different parts of the world. In the following chapter (3), Lyons and Lawrence lay the ground for a deeper understanding of international social work, which can be seen not only as an area of activity but also as 'a lens through which to view practice' (p. 29). The authors start with a brief recapitulation of the ideas presented in Chapters 1 and 2 and then move to the relevance of international perspectives to social work with different user groups, primarily people vulnerable for some reason, on the margins of or even excluded from mainstream society. The themes addressed by the authors are:

- commonalities and differences between people and countries;
- social issues and how they are understood between people and countries;
- cross- cultural knowledge and communication skills;
- ideas about 'family' and implication for social work; and
- values which are inclusive and which advance anti-oppressive practices.

The issues raised in this chapter are fundamental to international social work, but one which is of particular importance is the problem of 'translation' and communication between social workers and members of minority ethnic/linguistic communities or migrants. The authors of Chapter 4, Simpson and Littlechild, stress the importance of community traditions and cultural identity for the understanding of child rearing, but also the dangers of uncritical cultural relativism in relation to child protection. Williams, Foggin and Joubert (Chapter 5) consider different approaches to understanding and defining 'mental health' and 'mental ill health' in an international context. Lawrence and Simpson (Chapter 6) explore how international perspectives can be used in work with elderly people and their families, and finally Price and Huegler (Chapter 7) give an insight into the interplay of different societal and cultural responses to a range of disabilities and impairments and to a diversity of experiences of disabled people themselves. The closing chapter (8), written by Lyons and Lawrence, gives a kind of flashback to the origins of social work from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and looks forward to the prospects of international social work.

At the end of the book the reader will find a comprehensive list of Web-based resources for international social work, and a glossary with a set of definitions of the words and acronyms used in international social work.

The material presented in the book is very well structured; each chapter starts with a brief introduction, preceded by the quotation from the National Occupational Standards for Social Work which is relevant to the topic discussed in the following pages. The intention of the editors is to encourage potential readers to reflect creatively on what they learn and to apply this learning to their own experience and practice. To achieve these goals the authors ask questions (activity boxes) and give examples from different parts of the world (case study boxes), followed by additional comments and a summary at the end of each chapter. The richness and diversity of examples or cases which are used to examine theories and models for social work practice in different settings and contexts, along with the easily understandable language which makes it accessible to beginners, are the main strengths of the book. Of course the advanced reader would probably expect a more exhaustive presentation of the complicated matters of international social work, but I am sure that this textbook will be used by many students and teachers all over the world.

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