

Social Work Research- knowledge and networks: Critical friends or?

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The era of *evidence-based practice*: or *what works*?

- ‘evidence-based practice is the idea that occupational practices ought to be based on scientific evidence. The movement towards evidence-based practices attempts to encourage, and in some cases require professionals and other decision makers to pay more attention to evidence to inform their decision making. The goal of evidence-based practice is to eliminate unsound outdated practices in favour of more effective ones by shifting decision making basis from tradition, intuition & unsystematic experience to firmly grounded scientific research (Wikipedia 2025)
- (NB: serious caveat /warning by David Quinton of not allowing ‘concern +*effectiveness* to eliminate *entitlement*’)

Background to increased importance of evidence based social work practice (EBSW)

- Influence of evidence-based medicine: Eg.1990s increased systematic research , eg. RCTs,
- Policy & accountability pressures: Govts / funding bodies wanting VFM ; assurance interventions were effective
- Criticism of professional discretion : distrust of practitioner judgement ; faith in standardised practice
- Growth of research and knowledge infrastructure : s/w research; databases; systematic reviews; HEI incorporating research in training
- Managerialism & New Public Management: performance targets; outcome measurement; audits

The ‘research industry’ : an evolving cast list- 1985 on

- **Individual researchers in various voluntary /HEI organisations, eg Jane Rowe, BAAF; Millham et al at Dartington**
- **University based research groupings, e.g. Loughborough; Bristol**
- **Organisations with a primary aim of carrying out/disseminating research funded by government, e.g. NCB; Thomas Coram Research Unit; Rees Centre; Research in Practice .**
- **Government- funded /favoured structures, e.g. *What Works Centre for Children & Families***
- **Current model now emerging - an individual selected by government to carry out a review (e.g. Narey on adoption; MacAlister on children’s social care)**

Some questions/risks :

- *To what extent does government support/sponsorship of the evidence base impact on research/researchers?*
- *‘Exclusion risks’ – e.g. do WW centres & promotion of evidence- based- commissioning prioritise RCTS to exclusion of lived experience? Or other considerations?*
- *Do evidence- based programmes e.g. SoS; Triple P, generate ‘mechanical conformity’ of social workers...?*
- *Can prioritising some methods -e.g. RCTs-reduce scope of knowledge generation?*
- *How far can “social work context issues” such as poverty & discrimination be easily measured?*
- *Can an evidence- based mantra, e.g. Payment by Results be used to justify cost cutting?*

Social work education: Understanding the impact of networks on professional identities, roles and practice

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Social work education: A potted recent history

CQSW → DipSW → Social work degree

CCETSW → GSCC → HCPC → SWE

- Traditional Bachelors and Masters programmes based on partnerships with LAs and other agencies
- Employment based routes and the apprenticeships
- Fast track programmes—Step up, Think Ahead, Frontline

Frontline

- Arose from a paper for IPPR in 2012 by McAllister and has been running for over 10 years
- Describes itself as “a children’s charity”
- Has had involvement of wide range of “partners” including Boston Consulting group (Trustees include social workers, Barclays, Mumsnet, care experienced individuals)
- Enjoyed support of and promotion by both key Labour and conservative politicians
- Evaluated in 2016 and included in the DfE Longitudinal study (2018-22)
- Awarded continued contract in 2023 although with tougher PbR criteria-First line programme for managers discontinued
- Rebranded as “Approach social work”

Policy Drivers for Frontline

- A major weakness of the sector being calibre of social workers
- That traditional universities were part of the problem--produce too many poor social workers (Wood)---too much AOP (Narey)
- A scepticism about the role of social work
- “Reform” of the public services
- An wider scepticism toward professionals and expertise (EG health, education, Police”

Matters arising

- Improving the calibre of social worker = “brightest and the best” (now revised for a number of reasons)
- Reinforced inequalities and disrupted traditional training routes
- Did not have an impact on retention and did not lead to “a new generation of leaders”
- A component of a wider debate led by non social workers that undermined the post Munro / SWRB consensus around need to improve the quality of practice

Professional identities

- Lack of a university link and therefore with research community
- Curriculum that privileges skills-- interventions and approaches such as MI, systemic practice, psychology etc.
- A focus on children and young people as opposed to working with families
- Lack of coverage of sociology and structural factors that IMPACT on individuals and their communities lives
- Reflects wider debates about the roles and inter-relationship between skills knowledge and values informing what it constitutes ethical practice particularly in statutory roles (Competencies, key roles, PCF KSS)

Implications for current reform agenda

- Vision of community based integrated services that is strength based and focused more on family support—real challenges around implementation, funding and some key aspects of model
- What about the role of social work?
- Is therefore a danger of this wider climate of scepticism leading to unrealistic/ unreasonable expectations of alternatively qualified staff
- Will it lead to an unhealthy narrowing of the role of social work re CP?

Final words

- Is the world of social work and welfare more widely always full of networks and alliances?
- Doesn't an element of disruption lead to improvement and innovation?

However

- Is there a danger of seriously undermining elements of the professional and service ecosystem (and accountability)?
- Are avoiding crucial and fundamental questions about the resources of the welfare state?