



ERIS web journal, 2/2012

Evidence-Based Practice – Key Concept for Social Work Science and Practice across Europe?

Peter Erath

Abstract

Though the concept of evidence-based practice is very well known to social work scientists and practitioners in the Nordic states and in England, it's far away from being generally accepted across Europe. But, due to important political, ethical and legal changes the need for evidence in social work practice cannot any longer be questioned. Based on the Theory of knowledge of Lyotard, the presenter tries to state that in a postmodern society, especially in the area of social work, there is not only a need for a complex and sophisticated understanding of practices but as well for a practice which is based on transparency, critical analysis, and research. An example is given to demonstrate that the empirical relevance of evidence in social work always has to be restricted for ecological reasons. Thus the research standard of validity gives us reasons to assume that there is more plausibility for the concept of a European evidence-based practice than for an international one.

Key words

Ethical responsibility, accountability, knowledge production, knowledge statement, meta-reflection, family group conference, social work research and ecology

Evidence-based practice - a new approach to reinstall positivism in social work?

The concept of evidence-based practice is very well known to social work scientists and practitioners in the Nordic states, in England and in the Netherlands. However, for example, as in Germany (and maybe in other European countries) it can be argued the social work debate is rather more defined away from this concept:

- theoretically by a strong holistic view on social work which gives preference to all kind of critical-hermeneutic, reflective, experience-based, systemic and holistic ways of thinking and thus allows to avoid speaking about evidence or accountability;
- organisationally by a predominance of normatively grounded strategies, due to the strong influence of church- and value-based welfare organisations within a system based on subsidiarity which gives these organisations more credit than for-profit or professional ones;
- academically by a rather hostile attitude of the main representatives of social work scientists against empirical research in the field of social work, due to a very narrow critical understanding of social work and its role in society (see: Otto et al. 2009).

So we can imagine why the messages from other countries about the implementation of the philosophy of evidence-based practice (Soydan 2009) and also the message from the International Federation of Social Workers that “social work bases its methodology on a

systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context” (www.ifsw.com) has been a kind of a shock to the German social work community. Especially because there was not much knowledge about the subject, expect may be the definition from Sackett et al. (1997) which defines evidence-based medicine as:

“conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about care of individual patients, based on skills which allow the doctor to evaluate both personal experience and external evidence in a systematic and objective manner (p.71)”

So the overall response to this movement until the end of the 20th century in Germany was: that is crude positivism, which we had long overcome, so we will go down the pathway towards a “democratic professionalism” (Nothdurfter/Lorenz 2010), and base our decisions on personal experience, democratic debate and critical reflection.

The new need for evidence

However, even in Germany the European policy of the ‘activating welfare state’ had to be acknowledged. So within the last twenty years social work as science and practice has been confronted with changing policies and strategies whereas help is no longer only regarded as a kind of altruistic gift but as an enabling service which is legally guaranteed by the state and funded by taxes of the citizens. All in all, especially the service paradigm, has led to many changes in views on social work which gave more importance to the concept of evidence.

The new political perspective: legitimation

In a postmodern world politics has to deal with many subjects and therefore with many different perspectives and expectations. The overall problem is therefore how and where to find enough arguments in order to justify political decisions. According to Bourdieu (1998), the current tendency is to use and place a stress on empirical data in order to show the inevitable outcome of a given decision.

One example from Germany: the Christian conservative government wanted to introduce a “cash for care” concept which would give mothers 150 Euros monthly if they do not use public Kindergartens for their children between 1 and 3. German social workers in the first place “felt” that this strategy would lead, especially lower socio-economics and immigrant mothers, to take the money and keep their children at home. Thus those children who are most in need of public support would stay at home, often without good care. But the problem was that no studies in Germany could be consulted which would have given support to this position. Only thanks to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development “*Report on the Labour market integration of immigrants and their children in Norway*” could clear data be found which demonstrates the negative consequences of a “cash for care” concept.

The new ethical perspective: responsibility

Many German social work academics and practitioners would certainly argue that social work should be based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. But within a service culture this cannot be enough. According to Howard Gardner, a Professor for Psychology at Harvard University, we all but especially professionals are in need of an “ethical mind” or an ethical orientation which is not only based on specific values which tell us e.g. how we should behave towards others or how a social worker should act in a crisis intervention. “The challenge for everybody is to act on the basis of responsibility.” (Gardner 2008, p.14)

“Thus, the Ethical Mind reflects on different roles that we fulfil and talks about what are the proper ways to fulfil those roles and tries, though not always successfully, but at least makes the effort, to fulfil those responsibilities.” (p.15)

As a result of his thinking, Howard Gardner has developed what he called “The Good Work” project. According to him good work which aims at doing justice to the value of responsibility has to embody the three Es:

- **E**xcellence in a technical way;
- **E**ngagement – that people are meaningfully involved with what they are doing and they find it motivating; and
- **E**thical, behaving responsibly in their world as a worker. (Gardener 2008, p. 15, 2011, p.5)

According to Gardner the problem with the three Es is that they don’t necessarily co-exist. Someone could be excellent but not ethical. Another one could be ethical but not engaged, or engaged but not excellent. Obviously the problem is that the three Es should strictly belong together. In other words: there is no ethical social work without excellence. Thus the consequence and message has to be: a modern social work has to find out what is excellent.

The new legal perspective: accountability

The problem of legal responsibility in case of failure or mismanagement within organisations and firms has led to a movement which tries to stress – more positively - the idea of corporate accountability. So e.g. in Germany the *CorA* network (Corporate accountability – network for corporate responsibility) as a member of the European platform for corporate accountability ECCJ (European Coalition for Corporate Justice) has created a civil network which comprises more than 250 non-profit organisations. The aim of the organisation is especially to oblige firms to respect international and ecological values and quality standards.

Besides a lot of ethical and ecological obligations two of the most important obligations are for

- effective sanction and liability rules for corporations and
- strengthening for product responsibility and the promotion of services which are able to meet future requests.

“Given the global reach of European companies, it is crucial to ensure that they are held legally accountable for the impacts their operations have on people and the environment. This can be achieved though not exclusively through the endorsement and implementation of European and international standards. Legal standards provide the potential to better ensure global social justice, poverty alleviation and environmental conservation. ECCJ is convinced that turning the EU into a leading actor on CA would, in turn, greatly influence discussions on CA and CSR at the global level.” (Corporate Justice)

Looking at increasing numbers of failures and mismanagement in social work in Germany and possible legal consequences it seems to be time for our organisations to abide by these values and go deeper into the questions of quality, quality standards, organisational values and of course empirical evidence.

Evidence-based practice and knowledge production?

However, the more we collect reasons in order to demonstrate the importance of the evidence-based discourse the more we have to be careful and recognize that evidence has to do with knowledge and knowledge production. Jean-Francois Lyotard has taught us to reflect the status of knowledge and science in postmodern societies. His basic assumption is that scientific knowledge is “a kind of discourse” (1984, p.3) where especially technological transformations (e.g. modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their

languages, the compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, etc.) have a considerable impact.

The first and very important acknowledgement thereby is that knowledge “can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information.” (p.4)

“We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language.” (p.4)

The consequences for both users and producers of knowledge is that they must be able to understand the “set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as ‘knowledge’ statements” (p.4.). The city of Hamburg for example developed a computer programme (JUS-IT) which should improve the quality of children and youth services. In particular the programme has the function of a memory and gives guidance to the staff. Above all it is designed to reduce risk, accelerate the proceedings, save money and improve co-operation between the police, hospitals etc. So all in all it is an organisational tool; a totally other question is if it will help social workers to make better decisions for the sake of their clients.

A second acknowledgement is that the relationship between the suppliers (e.g. scientists) and the users (e.g. social workers) of knowledge “will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers” (p.4); knowledge will be more and more produced to be sold. But if we are knowledge buyers, then we should carefully assess what we are buying.

For example professors at universities (including myself) tend more and more to sell their research products in order to get money for their next piece of research. Thus not a pure but pragmatic form of knowledge will be produced and users will have to watch carefully if this knowledge is really suitable for their usage.

As a third acknowledgement we have to consider (as Bourdieu pointed out) that within this new form knowledge will become a major stake in the worldwide competition for power. (So e.g. Politicians from Switzerland want to strengthen the place of banking in Zurich by creating a “Swiss Harvard university”, an excellence centre which helps to avoid Switzerland becoming a “Disney country”). Consequently nation-states and multi-national corporations will increasingly fight for control of information. And therefore “the relationship between economic and State power threatens to arise with a new urgency” (p.6). Consequently we’ll carefully have to prove if new social work knowledge really is for clients or not.

A fourth acknowledgment is that we have to respect that scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge and therefore is no longer the guarantee for knowledge but tells us only something about power structures. Especially in the field of medical research we can see how underestimated “alternative treatments” are in the scientific community due to the heavy influence of the pharmaceutical industries (Walach 2011).

What we can learn from these four acknowledgements is: each system such as e.g. the social work system needs a lot of knowledge, but the main problem remains: what is real important and what is less important knowledge or evidence?

The lesson of evidence-based medicine

A lot of social work scientists are complaining that the problem of social work is that we don’t have enough research results at our disposal (Erath 2012, p.159-173). But is the amount of knowledge a warranty for evidence and best practice? To answer this, let’s now look to the case of evidence-based medicine. According to Straus and Haynes (2009) the knowledge

base in primary clinical research literature has doubled within 10 years and means that more than 1.000 articles are indexed daily by MEDLINE (Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online). So there should be a lot of knowledge. But research has shown that

- physicians still “most often consulted textbooks” which frequently were “out of date”;
- the advice from colleagues (which they regularly seek) is often inaccurate;
- physicians are not able “to read” systematic reviews and e.g. believe “that a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of a treatment was equivalent to the treatment being ineffective” (p. 942) and
- systematic reviews often don’t meet the needs of physicians.

In order to improve evidence-based medicine Straus and Haynes are proposing that publications should focus especially on three aspects:

- Reliability: Are the research results highly valid?
- Relevance: Is the content of results really specific to the needs of well-defined groups of clinicians?
- Readability: Is the format of the text user-friendly and practice-oriented?

According to them journals in particular should work together to achieve these goals and to empower physicians to implement evidence-based research results.

The necessity for meta-reflection

So what are the consequences of these acknowledgements which are reducing the power of scientific knowledge?

Both social work scientists and practitioners should:

- a) Be able to identify scientific argumentations and research results as “language games”. This means they should be aware of the respective game constructions and should accept the rules while they are playing the game. Without these rules research results can’t be externally evaluated, compared or critically reflected. A big problem thereby will be the insufficient knowledge base of social workers concerning the relevance of scientific methods.
- b) Be able to read and understand the different games and thus make their own well-grounded statements and decisions. When e.g. Kindler (2008) from the German Youth Institute wanted to present research results on child protection within a European conference he had to acknowledge that almost none from 500 German articles could be summarized because of problems with the scientific standards of the corresponding research projects.
- c) Be aware of the fact that agonistics between different games are the founding principle for new games. For a very long time the “placebo-effect” was understood as a problem or interference factor. Nowadays we have new theories which are regarding the placebo as something which is constructive: it is a healing factor which helps people to think positively and thus improves life conditions (Wallach 2011).

So the lesson we have to learn before dealing with research, knowledge and evidence is that we always have - within a process of meta-reflection - to carefully weigh results against each other and then make decisions. Because of this complexity Nevo and Slonim-Nevo (2011) have proposed to use the term “evidence-informed” instead of “evidence-based” practice. According to their opinion practitioners should be encouraged to use knowledge and experience in an integrative manner. Evidence-informed practice could therefore better demonstrate “that practice knowledge and intervention decisions might be *enriched* by prior

research but not *limited* to it” (Epstein 2009, p.9). In my opinion the term “informed” is too weak and therefore not able to make a clear statement concerning the evidence: if there is clear evidence we should stick to it and not leave a way out for arbitrary decisions.

Why a European culture of evidence- based practice?

As Hüttemann / Sommerfeld (2006, p.398) pointed out, research in social work has always to include the conditions of the agency of the relevant people. Research results which could be used for the concept of evidence-based practice should usually be based on a comparison of different research results. But a comparison or meta-reflection is only possible if we very carefully try to demonstrate that the respective comparisons are based on similar mechanisms and context variables. In other words: the ecological factor is a very important aspect in social work research and therefore we have to stress on ecological validity. Of course there are some differences respectively to the social life and to social work in different European states. But it can be argued that the differences with e.g. India, Australia, US, China etc. are far more obvious than across Europe. As Sundell et al (2011) pointed out “doubts can arise regarding the merit of results in European settings when systemic reviews are based on research conducted primarily in the United States” (p.720). There are a lot of areas in social work where it makes absolutely no sense to compare research results from different continents as

- it makes a fundamental difference in social work if inclusion / exclusion is a human rights condition or a personal choice,
- it makes a fundamental difference if social work is embedded in a social welfare state system or in a dictatorial or military regime,
- it makes a difference in social work if social workers have to balance a double mandate or have a clear control function with corresponding legal duties,
- it makes a difference if clients are entitled to appeal to a national or to the European Court or if they have almost no legal rights, etc.

An Example

But that doesn't mean of course that the communication with other continents is without any use for us. As Ute Straub pointed out the model of “family group conferences” was a “gift from New Zealand to Europe” (Straub 2011, p.26). The model is containing a step procedure facilitated by a (social work) coordinator who helps to prepare a conference wherein three stages allow the family to find its own way out of the problems:

- a) information giving
- b) family-only-time
- c) agreeing on a plan of action.

The model can be used as an example for evidence-based practice because it is not only theoretically profound-reflected but is also empirically proven. Research in the Netherlands and in other European countries have shown that the model does not only help to strengthen the family network but also to hold on to social work values, and helps the social worker to stay with the family, and enable more children to stay in their families, which helps to save money as well, etc.

“Family Group Conferencing is about mutual self reliance and the right of citizens to remain in control of their own lives, even in times of trouble when official institutions are playing an important part. This philosophy should become the starting point in help and welfare, available to everyone.” (<http://www.familygroupconference2011.eu/>). It seems that this message is spreading cross-border among European social workers and may cause a paradigm shift in social work approaches. This and the impact on (extended) families and their role and

participation in civil society will have to be proved by future long-term studies. (Straub 2012, p.33)

Another research project is e.g. INCANT (International Cannabis Need of Treatment) in Belgium, France, The Netherlands Switzerland and Germany. The Action Plan stresses the need of a trial to test an outpatient treatment of cannabis use disorders in troubled youth. The treatment selected is Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT), developed by researchers from the University of Miami. (see www.incant.eu)

Conclusion

Why is evidence-based practice (EBP) so important for the future of social work? Because otherwise it might be that we stay with our old ways, and Family Group Conferences might never get the prominence they deserve across Europe. So we as professors and teachers have to spread the knowledge through journals and professional bodies so that maybe it will then take only a few years.

“If we look what EBP shares with a social work perspective, we can see that the ‘best practices’ in the research arena call for transparency, critical analysis, and an openness to dialogue.” (Shdaimah 2009, p. 28)

Obviously EBP is not only to help social worker to use best practice but at the same time to make social work a “good work project” –what it should ever be!

Literature

- Bourdieu, P. (1998): *Praktische Vernunft. Zur Theorie des Handelns*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp
- Corporate Justice: In: <http://www.corporatejustice.org/-about-eccj,012-.html?lang=en>, Zugriff 13.08.2012
- Epstein, I. (2009): ‘*Promoting harmony where there is commonly conflict: Evidence-informed practice as an integrative strategy*’. In: *Social Work in Health Care* 48, pp. 216-231
- Erath, P. (2012): *Sozialarbeit in Europa. Fachliche Dialoge und transnationale Entwicklungen*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Gardner, H. (2008): *Five Minds for the Future*. Note: This paper was given as an oral presentation at the Ecolint Meeting in Geneva, January 13, 2008. <http://www.howardgardner.com/Papers/papers.html>. Zugriff 13.08.2012
- Gardner, H. (2011): *The GoodWork Project®: An Overview*. In: http://www.goodworkproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/GW_Overview-08_11.pdf. Zugriff 13.08.2012
- Hüttemann, M., Sommerfeld, P. (2006): *Evidence-based Social work*. In: *Soziale Arbeit und Ethik im 21. Jahrhundert*. Ein Handbuch. Hrsg. von S. Dungs, U. Gerber, H. Schmidt, R. Zitt. Leipzig. Ev. Verlagsanstalt: p. 386-402.
- Kindler, H. (2008): *Developing Evidence-Based Child Protection Practice: A View from Germany*. In: *Research on Social Work Practice* 18, S. 319-324.
- Liotard, (1984): *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge. Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 10, Manchester: University Press.
- Otto, H.U./Polutta, A./Ziegler, H. (2009): *Reflexive Professionalism as a Second Generation of Evidence-Based Practice. Some Considerations on the Special Issue “What Works? Modernizing the Knowledge-Base of Social Work”*. In: *Research on Social Work Practice* 9, S. 472-478.
- Nothdurfter, U., Lorenz, W. (2010): *Beyond the Pro and Contra of Evidence-Based Practice: Reflections on a Recurring Dilemma at the Core of Social Work*. In: *Social Work & Society*, Vol. 8. (urn:nbn:de:0009-11-27027). P 1-15. Visit from 24.01.2011.
- Sackett, D.L./Richardson, S./Rosenberg, W./Haynes, R.B. (1997): *Evidence-based Medicine. How to Practice and Teach*. EBM. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.
- Shdaimah, C.S. (2009): *What does Social Work have to offer Evidence-based Practice?* In: *Ethics and Social Welfare* 3, S. 18-31
- Soydan, H. (2009): *Towards the gold standard of impact research in Social Work –avoiding threats to validity*. In: Otto, H.U./Polutta, A./Ziegler, H. (Eds.): *Evidence-based Practice – Modernising the Knowledge Base of Social Work?* Opland & Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers. S. 111-137
- Straub, U. (2012): *Family group conference in Europe: From margin to mainstream*. In: *web journal* 3, 1/2012, pp. 26-35
- Straus, S., Haynes R.B. (2009): *Managing evidence-based knowledge: the need for reliable, relevant and readable resources*. In: *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 180, pp. 942-945

Sundell, K./Soydan, H./Tengvald, K./Anttila, S. (2009): *From Opinion-Based to Evidence-Based Social Work: the Swedish Case*. In: *Research on Social Work Practice* 20, S. 714-722

Walach, H. (2011): *Weg mit den Pillen. Selbstheilung oder warum wir für unsere Gesundheit Verantwortung übernehmen müssen. Eine Streitschrift*. München: Irisiana

Author:

Prof. Dr. Peter Erath

Katolischen Universität Eichstatt-Ingolstadt

Germany

Email: peter.erath@altmuehlnet.de