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## How do Social Workers use Evidence in Practice?

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# PBPL

Practice-based Professional  
Learning Centre



The Open  
University

**Final report from the PBPL funded project:**

**How do social workers use evidence in  
practice?**

**Project Principals:**

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**2009**

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## Aims of the research

Scotland's 21st Century Review of Social Work, "Changing Lives", told us that, "*If we are serious about developing social work as a profession and having practitioners able to practise safely and innovatively, then we need to both develop and use evidence to inform practice*" (Scottish Executive, 2006: 55). This research investigates how social work practitioners make use of research, inquiry, and other forms of knowledge evidence to inform their practice. The study uses a 'critical best practice' approach (Ferguson, 2003) to learn from the analysis of detailed examples of how social workers use knowledge in their day to day practice with service users and carers. A best practice approach offers an opportunity to move away from the "climate of negativity" experienced by social work in the UK (Jones et al., 2008:1), and to celebrate some of the achievements of skilled social work practitioners. At the same time taking a critical lens to practice offers potential to gain a better understanding what such practice actually 'looks like' as it happens, promoting positive learning about social work and, ultimately, better outcomes for service users and carers (Jones et al., 2008: 15).

This research has been conducted under the umbrella of the Critical Best Practice social work research group at the Open University, and has benefited from the discussions and contributions of other members of this group. Its findings are intended to complement a small but growing literature about critical best practice in the UK. The study also aims to contribute to current debates about how social work practitioners understand and use knowledge evidence, an area of research in which the perspectives of social worker practitioners themselves have received remarkably little attention (Trevethick, 2008). The subject is highly topical, both in Scotland, which is currently consulting on both its Research and Development and Knowledge Management Strategies (IRISS, 2008; IRISS/NES, 2009), as well as in the health and social care sector in the UK as a whole. It is also hoped that findings of the research will be able to make a helpful contribution to social work and other practice-based education through more tangible outputs, such as learning materials for students and practitioners.

The research, which was conducted between April and December 2008, broke down its aims into the following key questions:

- What forms of evidence do social workers draw on in practice?
- How do social workers understand and draw upon knowledge evidence?
- What conditions (such as skills, training, values and organisational culture) support good practice in the use of evidence to inform practice?

## Activities

### Methodology

The methods used in this research build on those from other studies which have focused in on the specifics of 'live' social work practice with service users and their families. A critical best practice approach involves "detailed description and analysis of actual social work practice drawn from real events and cases" to expose the complexity of the social work task (Cooper, 2008: 3). The methodology is a qualitative one that aims to access, analyse, and learn from detailed accounts of the experiences of a small number of social workers through in depth interviewing. This study also draws on narrative approaches which assume that when we tell stories we convey messages about the meaning or understanding we have gained from our experiences (Shaw and Shaw, 1997, Blom et al., 2007).

The original intention had been to use a semi structured topic guide as a framework for each interview. However, on reflection, this seemed to run the risk of placing a 'straightjacket' on the "kind of inherent rules and processes" which practitioners may use to think about and plan their work (Marsh and Fisher, 2008: 978). Therefore the interviews were conducted without a fixed interview schedule, but with the aid of a flip chart sheet and pens which the interviewer used to 'map' the chronological stages of intervention, using headings such as 'Engagement', 'Assessment', and 'Planning' as appropriate to the chosen example of practice. This was a variation of Osmond and O'Connor's "knowledge map" (2006: 9), used as a tool to stimulate practitioners' reflections on how they used knowledge in specific examples of social work practice. The approach used also reflected an inclusive stance to accessing practitioner experience "as it happens" (Fook, 2002: 86-7), rather than creating or imposing more 'artificial' ways of collecting data.

### Planned activities

The research proposal set out plans for:

- ❖ An in depth qualitative study, examining the practice of social work practitioners in a range of different social work settings.
- ❖ The involvement of three agencies in Scotland that employ qualified social workers: one voluntary and two statutory sector organisations.
- ❖ In depth interviews with six social workers identified by their employers as exemplifying critical best practice in their day to day work with service users and carers, and willing to discuss an example of their social work practice in an interview.

- ❖ Analysis of the data using a critical best practice framework.
- ❖ A range of proposed dissemination methods, including the development of learning materials for students and practitioners, and publication as a book chapter or journal article.

In practice there were no major changes to these plans, although seeking agency approval for practitioner involvement in the research was more time consuming than expected so that the research took three months longer than originally anticipated. Dissemination and use of the research is also likely to take place over a longer period than first visualised (until at least the end of 2009) due to timing of relevant conferences and journal submissions.

## Data collection and analysis

One face to face interview of up to two hours was conducted with each social work practitioner. Each interview involved detailed discussion of, and reflection on, one example of practice chosen by the practitioner, in discussion with the interviewer. The interviews were designed to provide opportunities to assist practitioners to 'unpick' their use of evidence to inform practice. In each case it was explained that it was the use of knowledge that was of interest in this research rather than the specialist nature of the evidence used.

Practitioners were told that the interviewer would ask questions during their narrative. Examples of the kinds of questions were given, which included:

- ❖ What knowledge did you use to help you do that?
- ❖ Were there other kinds of knowledge that you used?
- ❖ Where did the knowledge come from?
- ❖ What helped you access (or use) that knowledge?
- ❖ Were there barriers to you accessing (or using) knowledge?

The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, with the participant's written permission. Transcriptions of the interviews were sent to all six social workers and any comments or alterations that they wanted to make to these records were incorporated.

Each interview transcript was analysed by identifying and coding recurrent themes from the social workers' accounts, identifying patterns, themes, and trends which related to the research questions. An analytic framework developed by Punch (1998), was used to develop a thematic chart which helped to clarify different levels of analysis, working from the very finely detailed data provided by participants through increasingly broadly defined first and second orders of analysis. Although

the analysis was partly designed to establish comparisons and commonalities of experiences between different practitioners in different practice contexts, it also tried to minimise fragmentation so that the narrative of each practitioner remained situated in the realities of the social and organisational context in which they worked. This is congruent with a critical best practice approach which recognises the complex and contextual integration of skills, values, and knowledge involved in high quality social work practice with service users and carers.

## Ethics

The research was conducted in line with the ethical principles of the Social Research Association (2003). Practitioners completed written consent forms that clarified the ethical basis of the study before participating in the research. The social workers were asked not to use names or any other identifying details when they discussed cases in the interviews, and any further potentially identifying information (e.g. place names) were removed when the interviews were transcribed. Information held on computers and hard copy was transmitted and stored in line with the Data Protection Act 1998.

## Findings

### Summary of main findings

#### Selecting, using, and combining knowledge

The accounts of practice provided by the six social workers all appeared to fulfil the definition of critical best practice. They demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection on their actions and thoughts in ways that were “both skilful and deeply respectful for service users...while at the same time using good judgement and authority” (Jones et al., 2008: 15). The social workers referred to a complex and interacting mix of practice experience, social work and other theory, and knowledge of legislation, methods of intervention, and local and national policy, procedures, and resources in all the practice examples chosen. Whilst interviewee’s accounts of practice varied greatly in the *kinds* of knowledge used, there were some strong similarities in the ways the social workers described the *way* that they used knowledge. They talked about using knowledge in a very active and reflective way that appeared to involve working on many different levels at the same time. As one social worker said,

*“Even while I’m sat here talking to you I’m actually running four or five different thoughts in my head at the same time...”*

Understanding where knowledge came from was sometimes complicated and difficult to articulate *“because it all just blends”*. However, the social workers were able to describe multiple sources of knowledge, from early personal experiences through social work and other training, and practice experience. The most frequently mentioned source of knowledge was the social workers’ past and current experience of working with service users and carers. However, in-service training, supervision with managers, social work qualifying training, practice discussions with colleagues, and reading were also regularly cited as significant to the social workers’ use and development of knowledge. Both intuition and personal experience were evidently valued but were regarded with some caution, and had to be set against other knowledge forms to confirm their utility. This ‘balancing act’, as practitioners assessed the relevance and validity of different kinds of evidence, was observed in all the interviews, with practitioners appearing to use a kind of continuous triangulation to achieve ‘best fit’ between practice and knowledge. This was well illustrated by one of the practitioners reviewing her use of different kinds of knowledge to inform an assessment of a foster carer:

*“..although instincts have a role you really need the evidence, which is where we draw on the theory and our experiences in terms of working with carers and doing assessments, to kind of back up. Or kind of, you know...counteract what our instincts were, because it doesn’t necessarily support it at the end of the day. You might find that the evidence you get actually dismisses what the initial instincts were.”*

Different forms of evidence therefore seemed to be used together to confirm and disconfirm the practitioner’s developing understanding and theorising about the service users needs and context. In some cases it seemed necessary for practitioners to gain direct practice evidence before some knowledge, such as research findings, was fully taken on board. For example one social worker said,

*“...you might have all the [research] evidence there but it’s actually when the carers come to you and say, “Yes, that’s really what the issue is”, you think, “Oh, well the two link in there.”*

This finding co-incides with previous research about the importance to practitioners of developing ‘ownership’ of evidence through active and creative engagement with new knowledge within the practice context (Pollio, 2006, Walter et al., 2003).

Not only were preferred sources of knowledge variable, but each participant in this research produced a very individual ‘knowledge map’. Respondents were themselves very clear about the contextual nature of their knowledge, and the need to regard each service user’s circumstances as unique. However, the ‘maps’ also seemed to demonstrate some individual characteristics that related to the kinds of knowledge that practitioners themselves counted as valid and reliable evidence. For example, some theories were thought to *“suit”* some practitioners more than others.

## Supports and barriers to using knowledge

The social workers identified a number of factors, both personal and organisational, that supported critical best practice in knowledge use. These capabilities included qualifications, workplace learning and practice experience. The social workers also demonstrated personal capabilities, such as openness to learning, motivation, persistence, flexibility, and a willingness to share knowledge, that informed their approach to using knowledge in practice. For example, one social worker said,

*“I think you’ve got to have an interest from the beginning...in good practice and looking at keeping up to date and, you know, to take responsibility for your own learning.”*

The social workers valued opportunities within their teams to reflect on practice and learn from each other,

*“.. I think probably it is experience, and I think it’s probably from observing other people doing it as well, and from talking to other people and doing it...”*

Regular supervision was seen by all the social workers in this research as a crucial aspect of this collaborative learning, and assumed particular importance in those working environments where there were high vacancy rates and colleagues that were perceived as too busy to discuss practice.

There were also perceived barriers to knowledge use in social work practice. Lack of time was a significant factor in limiting the extent to which these social workers were able to keep up to date with knowledge and to reflect on practice. Another was the extent to which these activities were seen as legitimate use of scarce time in the face of pressing practice demands when reading books or reflecting on practice could be interpreted by colleagues as a “*luxury*”.



## Unanticipated outcomes

This research did not start off with a particular hypothesis about best practice in knowledge use in social work, so, in a sense, none of the findings were strongly anticipated. Broadly speaking, the outcomes were congruent with previous research and writing that emphasises the role of the practitioner as an active user and maker of knowledge, as opposed to “a passive recipient of knowledge created elsewhere” (Marsh and Fisher, 2008: 977). However, the interviews did highlight a number of areas of interest, and some promising areas for future inquiry, in an area of research where the practitioner view has not received as much attention as policy and organisational perspectives on knowledge use. Two of these areas are highlighted below.

### Starting with practice

There was no evidence that these practitioners *started* with a particular template or explanatory theory against which to measure what they heard and saw when they started working with the service user, carer or family group. Rather it seemed that their theorising developed out of direct practice experience drawing more on inductive than deductive analytical processes (Fook, 2002).

The social workers themselves stressed the importance of their starting point being their direct experience of practice, with a strong view that good social work is not about ‘fitting’ service users and their lives into their knowledge about research or theory. Their approach has similarities to that of Blom et al. (2007), studying social work students’ use of knowledge in Sweden, who classified one aspect of a classification of knowledge as “un-knowing”, a condition in which practitioner knowledge is deliberately put to one side. This is well illustrated by one of the participants in this research, who said,

*“..you have to have your mind open. I think if you’ve already decided on a conclusion before you’ve asked the question then you’re not going to see other options.”*

This approach was also linked by several of the practitioners with their personal and professional value base, and, in particular, a stress on the uniqueness and individuality, and the views of the service users they worked with. This stance is also congruent with increasing emphasis in Scotland and the rest of the UK in the ‘personalisation’ of social services (Scottish Government, 2008).

## Talking about using theory and research findings

There was a contrast between the confident and articulate way that most of the social workers talked about their application of practice experience and both personal and professional values and their rather more diffident and hesitant use of theory and research findings. It took time during the interviews for practitioners to unravel this more 'academic' knowledge which appeared to be harder for the social workers to immediately access (or, possibly, to confidently verbalise in front of the researcher) their use of such evidence during research interviews. At the same time these sources of knowledge were evidently valued, and practitioners went to considerable lengths, often in their own time, to keep up to date with changing practice, policy, and new research in their field. In the closing stages of the interviews the social workers themselves were sometimes surprised by how much theory and research they had been able to call upon in discussing their practice during the interviews,

*"I think it has been beneficial for me just to see all that [knowledge on the 'map'] because I would kind of think that I probably don't use a huge amount of particular theories or anything, but actually looking at it what I am doing ...it is quite helpful for me to know that actually I do have access to a wide range of knowledge."*

## Impact

A critical best practice approach is essentially solution focused, providing "examples of ways of working that work" (Ferguson, 2003: 1021). The findings of this study suggest some ideas for how to support knowledge use and development in social work learning and practice, although these have to be tentative given the small scale nature of the research and the use of a single research method (see, for example, Osmond and O'Connor, 2006, for a more rounded multi-method approach).

## Teaching and learning

Social work training increasingly requires social work students to demonstrate their ability to draw on a range of knowledge to inform their practice to demonstrate a range of outcomes relating to use of evidence in practice (Scottish Executive, 2003). This research supports a proposition that students may learn best from inductive approaches that move "from the particular to the general" (Osmond and O'Connor, 2006: 15) in a way that mirrors how qualified social workers reflect on knowledge use in practice. This inductive style of learning is already well established in some areas in social work education, especially during student practice learning opportunities, but may be less frequently called upon in academic settings or once practitioners qualify. Some more specific examples of how this approach might be developed within the Open University and further afield are suggested below.

## Tools for learning

There is already evidence of the benefits of tools such as reflective diaries, process recordings and critical incident analysis which use problem solving, reflection and analysis to move from practice to identifying underpinning knowledge, skills and values (Cree and MacAulay, 2000). This study found that practitioners related well to using more visual methods of representation which make it possible to capture less linear links between aspects of practice and evidence and create opportunities for reflection and knowledge creation. Examples of tools that use similar methods include the Theory Circle (Collingwood, 2007) and the Practice Pyramid (Ross, 2002).

An example drawn from my own teaching practice as an Open University Associate Lecturer, supported by learning from this research, has involved the use of a visual representation of the 'Four Components of Good Practice' (OpenLearn, 2009), used on the Social Work practice programmes. Asking students to use this model to 'map' an example of work-based practice against their use of knowledge, skills, values, and processes has proved to be a useful – and 'low tech' - learning method. There may be potential for further developing the use of these methods within the Open University social work programme both through development of course materials and support for Associate Lecturers and agency based practice teachers in facilitating their use.

## Articulating knowledge for practice

This research raises some questions about the ability and/or confidence of qualified social workers to articulate the knowledge that they use in practice. This is a key skill for social workers, most visible when they are asked to justify life-changing decisions, such as taking legal action to protect children or adults, but necessary for any assessment, planning, or intervention in the lives of others. More recently qualified social workers with the relatively new degree level qualification in Social Work may arguably be more confident about owning their use of evidence for practice. However, there may be further opportunities to develop a greater range of ways to help students and qualified practitioners to talk as well as write in a confident way about how they use and create knowledge as they practice. Within the Open University Social Work Programme there may be opportunities to build on current good practice (e.g. in K315) by considering:

- ❖ How tutors, practice assessors and supervisors can model good practice in articulating knowledge use

- ❖ How to providing regular opportunities (e.g. in workshops and telephone tutorials) to practice these key skills in spoken as well as written form.
- ❖ How to develop assessment methods that give students practice in speaking as well as writing about using knowledge e.g. presentations, collaborative projects with other students
- ❖ The potential use of “bite size” excerpts of some of the practitioners’ transcripts as, for example, podcasts on Open University course websites (e.g. K315) to help social workers in training get a clearer idea of what using knowledge for practice ‘looks like’ from the social work practitioner’s perspective.

## Strategic change and learning design

### Judging knowledge claims

The findings suggest that critical best practice in social work involves not only the skills to identify relevant knowledge but also an understanding of how to judge its relevance to diverse practice situations. As Sheppard et al. (2000) point out it is not enough know ‘What Works’; there also has to be an understanding of how to use that knowledge to effect change. Pawson et al. (2003) have proposed a helpful framework for judging knowledge claims, TAPUPAS, based on a series of questions that address the transparency, accuracy, purposivity, utility, propriety, accessibility, and specificity of knowledge. This kind of framework may be helpful in enabling students and qualified workers to gain a better understanding of the processes involved in evidence use. This study emphasises the importance of considering how to support students gain familiarity and confidence with the processes involved in knowledge use, including the selection, combining, and prioritising of different forms of knowledge, as well as the more familiar emphasis on the outcomes of integrating theory and practice. There is potential for designing course content, materials and guidance to enable this kind of process learning. The findings also would seem to have a wider applicability to other practice-based learning such as nursing and education.

### Knowledge Maps

The basis of the professional decisions and judgements made in the cases discussed in this research seemed to arise from the very individual ‘knowledge maps’ created by practitioners rather than a more linear application of facts or theories learnt during qualifying training or subsequent learning to practice. This finding suggests that social work programmes may need to find ways to help

students develop a much greater understanding of the way in which they construct and use knowledge on an individual basis. The research does not give any specific messages about how to do this but this finding would benefit from further investigation. In particular, there is potential to use the data from this study in conjunction with some of that derived from the PBPL Theory and Practice residential event at Whittlebury Hall in November 2008 to examine these ideas further (see Deliverables report).

## National and local impact

The topical nature of this research has opened up some potential opportunities for influence, discussion, and collaboration with stakeholders in Scotland to support the implementation of 'Changing Lives':

**Employers:** Each of the three employing organisations in this study will receive a report of the study. Its findings should be useful in highlighting good practice in their organisations and suggesting ways to further enhance effective knowledge use in practice. For example, practitioners in this research were active in identifying and developing their own informal networks for collaboration; gaining better local understandings of existing local networks would enable employing organisations to build on these examples of good practice.

**Institute of Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS):** IRISS has been supportive of this research and has simultaneously been undertaking its own research into evidence informed practice in one of the employing organisations involved in this study. There is potential, subject to consent from the practitioners involved in this research, to combine these approaches to conduct an analysis of use of evidence from both organisational and practitioner perspectives. This 'two pronged approach' is relatively rare and may reveal some interesting commonalities and tensions between 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches to promoting evidence informed practice in a single local authority social work department.

**The Continuous Learning Framework:** This study highlights a range of both personal and organisational capabilities that support best practice in knowledge use. These capabilities show strong similarities with those identified in the newly developed Continuous Learning Framework (CLF) which sets out what people in the social service workforce in Scotland need to be able to do their job well and what employers need to support them to achieve this (SSSC, 2008). The research both provides some confirmation of the utility of the CLF and, since the CLF proved to be a useful framework for understanding some of the findings of this research, an example of the way in which the framework can be used for research and development purposes. There are opportunities to build on these links through discussion with the Scottish Social Services Council, as well as the possibility of

presenting findings related to these capabilities at a conference about *Social Competencies and Networked Learning* hosted by The European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning (EAPRIL) in Germany in November 2009.

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### Further information

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