

BOOK REVIEW: Evidence-based social work: A critical stand, by Mel Gray, Debbie Plath and Stephen A. Webb, London, Routledge, 2009.

This book attempts to paint a picture about evidence-based social work, including the key concepts, nature of social work knowledge, meaning and ways of producing evidence, international experiences and practitioner perspective. As its title implies, the book adopts a critical approach to analyze the related issues and controversies in the field.

Several strengths of this book are noted. First, in contrast to a plain description of evidence-based practice, the authors adopt a critical stance in examining the notion of evidence-based practice in social work. The common myths surrounding evidence-based practice, problems of the 'dominant' view of science, possible ways of generating evidence, and debates surrounding hierarchy of evidence and systematic reviews are discussed. Besides, the authors also discuss how the nature of evidence-based practice may change across the positivistic, pragmatic, political and postmodern paradigms. Throughout the book, the readers are encouraged to appreciate the complexity of evidence-based social work and problems involved in the transferability of evidence to practice. It is also argued that critical understanding of evidence-based social work is helpful to social workers in diverse practice arenas.

Second, the argument that evidence-based social work is an integration of scientific-positivistic, interpretivist-practical and political influences is proposed and an alternative definition of evidence-based practice is offered. In the alternative conception, "evidence-based practice entails the mobilization of a broad – international – specialist research infrastructure that can – if translation procedures

are put in place that directly address issues at the coalface – guide practitioners through particular interventions, support agencies in best practice governance and demonstrate positive outcomes for service users” (p. 171). Obviously, this definition will attract much criticism particularly from those hard-core supporters of the “conservative” notion of evidence-based practice, which will then generate much debate and discussion on the real and desired nature of evidence-based social work.

Third, the book takes into account the interests and perspectives of different stakeholders, particularly those of the practitioners. The barriers of “implementing” evidence-based social work and the possible strategies to deal with those barriers are explored. In the long run, progress in “implementing” the evidence-based social work approach must be contingent on the successful resolution of these barriers and this is one important area that social work researchers, educators and practitioners should work on. Finally, this book gives an excellent overview of the global diffusion of evidence-based practice as well as the emergence of evidence-based social work in the UK. The observations and experiences derived from these places are definitely insightful as far as the possible development of evidence-based social work is concerned. In particular, the observation that social workers do not conduct or use research (p. 109) deserves deep reflection amongst social work educators and practitioners.

Nevertheless, there are three areas that the authors can consider when they revise this book in future (I am confident that there must be updated editions of this stimulating book). First, it would be helpful if the authors could clarify their own philosophical standpoint and the meaning of “critical” stance – whether it is in the sense of critical realism, critical theories (such as neo-Marxism) or post-modernism.

Second, while the authors advocate pragmatic knowledge-based social work with critical inquiry and value perspectives as elements, the question of whether there are any criteria that can be used to differentiate “effective” from “ineffective” intervention should be answered and the limitations of this proposed approach should be considered. Finally, it would be helpful if the authors could add an additional chapter on the future of evidence-based social work based on their alternative definition of evidence-based practice with reference to the following questions – what is (and should be) the relationship between social work practice and research? What is the meaning of ‘useful’ research findings and ‘effective’ interventions according to the pragmatic approach? What is (and should be) included in research courses on social work education? What knowledge, skills and values must a social worker possess in order to thrive under the proposed alternative model?

It is a pleasure for me to read this book, and I am confident that many others, particularly human service practitioners, would have the same feeling. The authors should be commended for writing this book that is very informative and thought-provoking in nature. This book is a wonderful piece for those who wish to get a critical appraisal about evidence-based social work practice. I would recommend this book to social workers and allied professionals who wish to think differently and see evidence-based social work from an alternative perspective.

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