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.

Jan Steyaert
Fontys University of Applied Sciences
Eindhoven, Netherlands
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