

SSRG Annual Workshop 2006

Over 160 people participated in the 2006 Annual Workshop, which was held at St Catherine's College, Oxford University on Monday 27th, Tuesday 28th and Wednesday 29th March. The event was supported by BASW, CareKnowledge, Dataplus, the Guardian and SCIE.

'New Directions in Social Care: Meeting the Challenge of Change' featured a total of 11 plenary sessions and 19 workshop/small group sessions over the three days, and a lively debate between Jennifer Bernard and Kate Green that took place before the annual dinner.

Broadly, the first day focused on policy issues, the second day on evidence-informed practice, and the third day on performance assessment issues. All powerpoint slides that were used by presenters and other material from the workshop will be posted to the SSRG website.

Monday 27th March

Joanna Simons, Chief Executive of Oxfordshire County Council welcomed participants to St Catherine's College. This was followed by the first main session of the day, 'Adult Social Care - An Improving Picture?' which was delivered by Richard Humphries from the Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP), DoH, and Andrew Cozens, The second plenary speaker was

Naomi Eisenstadt, Secretary of State's Chief Adviser on Children's Services who discussed issues concerning the use of research in informing policy and practice in the early years services

The concluding plenary, entitled 'Put the People who use Social Care First' was delivered by Dame Denise Platt, Chair, Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), who spoke about



Dame Denise Platt

what people who use social care want from their services and how good social care can transform people's lives. She went on to discuss the Commission for Social Care Inspection's own approach to involving people who use services in

assessing service quality and issued a challenge to councils to listen more carefully to people and to take their views into account when planning new services or improving existing ones. She stated that Councils will have to find ways to include those people who find it hard to participate, who have profound and complex needs. Using information from the Commission's report to Parliament, 'The state of social care in England 2004-05', Dame Denise said that councils need to improve their commissioning strategies and take seriously their responsibility to ensure that there is a sufficiency of supply for the whole community they serve - not just for those whose care they expect to fund, but also for those who pay for their own care.

Tuesday 28th March

The first plenary on Tuesday was delivered by Celia Atherton and Rhiannon Hodson from Research in Practice, who asked: Whose responsibility is it to make sure that services for vulnerable children and

SSRG Annual Workshop 2006 cont.

their families are properly informed by research evidence? Should we place all our expectations on the front-line worker - to behave professionally and take personal responsibility? In their presentation 'Firm Foundations: More than words- What must Organisations do to Support Evidence-Informed Practice?' Celia and Rhiannon discussed what agencies need to do to provide the best infrastructure and climate for evidence-informed practice to thrive. They launched a practical handbook (firm foundations) that brings together the results of six years of collaborative work on this topic.



Celia Atherton

Martyn Hammersley presented the paper below in the second plenary of the day. The text of his handout is noted below. This paper and references has also been posted to the SSRG website, along with the ppt slides that Martyn used.

What should count as evidence in evidence-based practice?

Much of what I say in the paper can be summarised in the following theses:

There are significant limits to the evidence that research can provide for use by policymakers and practitioners. This is because the knowledge it produces is:

- fallible;
- restricted to factual matters; and
- cannot address all of the issues about which they may require evidence.

Neither policymaking nor practice can be proceduralised or made transparent, in the sense of being shown to be in line with evidence that is open to assessment by lay audiences. There is inevitable reliance on experience, wisdom, and judgment.

Attempts to proceduralise policymaking and practice

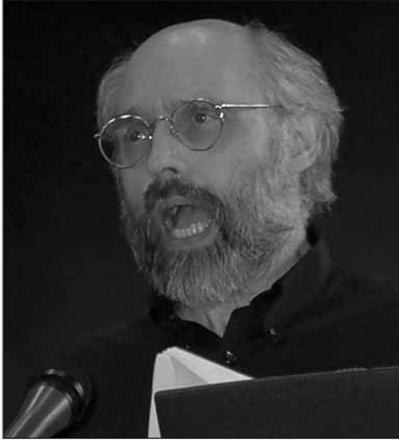
on the basis of research evidence may well lead to undesirable results: the privileging of formal targets over what is recognised to be of priority in the circumstances, the following of procedures even where these are not adequate to the situation, and so on.

The evidence-based practice movement is functioning as part of the 'new public management', which is fuelled by an aversion to risk and an aversion to dependence on the expertise of professionals. Yet:

- bad outcomes can never be completely avoided, are not always the product of wrong judgments, and no activity, however 'evidence-based', can avoid making mistakes;
- seeking to render practitioners accountable can worsen the quality of the work they do through undermining their confidence in their own expertise or putting constraints on them that require actions that are at odds with what they judge to be best.

The evidence-based practice movement often seems to rely on a naïve model of the nature of policymaking, one that overlooks or plays down the role of power, uncertainty, and chance. It

SSRG Annual Workshop 2006 cont.



Martyn Hammersley

seems to be wedded to what has been referred to as the rational model, whereby policy is a matter of deciding what is best for dealing with some problem in technical terms. Much work in political sociology has shown that this rational model does not capture the processes involved, and that it is rarely if ever likely to be appropriate. Decision-making is inevitably a much messier process, in which there is manoeuvring on the part of various parties involved, as well as negotiation and compromise, so that issues beyond 'technical' ones about what is the best solution often loom large. Moreover, what is best is rarely a consensual matter, nor can it usually be.

In these terms, the evidence-based policymaking and practice movement, like the notion

of new public management, must itself be seen as an element in current battles over how public policymaking in contemporary western societies should operate, *whose* interests should count, *what* goals are the priority, and so on. The idea that this movement is about advancing effectiveness, efficiency, and democratic accountability, while true in some respects, should not be allowed to blind us to the interests that are actually at work: that this movement is implicated in trends towards commercialisation of the public sector, and (more broadly) its subordination to 'economic' interests.

In summary, I suspect that increasing the role of research in policymaking and practice will not produce a step-change in overall quality, even though it can make smaller and more specific contributions. Moreover, in some contexts increasing the weight given to research evidence may worsen the quality of the decisions made. And the discourse of evidence-based practice obscures the diverse value considerations involved, and the scope for disagreement, about what is and is not an improvement.

Finally, we should recognise the sociological point that our ideas, arguments, preferences, and so on are caught up in societal movements of one sort or another. Just as arguments in favour of professional judgment can be used to protect professional self-interest at the expense of the interests of others, so too those involved in arguing for evidence-based practice are not simply rational actors advocating what is obviously valid. They too are caught up by socio-political forces that are currently in play in society. We can never entirely escape the influence of those forces, but nor is that necessary or even desirable. What is important is to try to monitor their influence on us so that we can attempt to counter any negative effects. It is particularly important to avoid good arguments being pushed through to bad conclusions and damaging consequences.

This paper is offered in this spirit.

SSRG Annual Workshop 2006 cont.

The final plenary of the day "The Many and the Few" was delivered by Bob Garnett, President of Confed, and John Coughlan, Vice President ADSS who discussed key issues arising from the "change for children" agenda and the developing relationship between Confed and ADSS

Wednesday 29th March 2006

John Bolton, Director of Community Services at Coventry chose the SSRG Conference to launch a piece of thinking that he has been doing on demonstrating value for money based on outcomes (or "service shape" as he prefers to call this) rather than unit costs.

Jonathan Phillips in the second plenary discussed "Developing Joint Approaches to the Assessment of Social Care and Health" He gave an overview of the joint work programme of the two commissions (CSCI and Healthcare Commission) in preparation for merger in 2008, including the benefits of a joint approach to regulation, review and inspection.

Janet Galley from CSCI, and Jill Munday from Ofsted discussed "Developing Joint Approaches to the



Jonathan Phillips

Assessment of Social Care and Education Services" Their presentation covered the development of the Integrated Inspection Framework with particular emphasis on two major features - the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) of council services for children and the Joint Area Review (JAR) of all children's services within a council area. The aims and methodologies were outlined along with the interconnection and differences between the two forms of assessment and inspection and initial feedback and evaluation on their effectiveness.

A Personal Perspective from an EC Member

During the 3 days I was able to meet up with people I hadn't seen since last year and to meet new people, which is just as important. I was also able to regain contact with my ex-colleagues from the PSSRU, David Challis and Paul Clarkson who did a workshop on the final day about local PI's. As with previous workshops I enjoyed several in-depth conversations with Paul Waddington who also made me laugh a lot, a change from work, which seems to be a humour-free zone at times!

After the annual dinner on the Tuesday night we had a quiz and I was actually able to get a question right because I knew the answer from a recent edition of "Heat". When I told my team members about this they were aghast so I told them that I only looked at the pictures and that I was trying to discover my "inner Bimbo". Following the quiz we were also treated to some musical entertainment from SSRG members and friends, which has actually inspired me to pick up the guitar at home again. Maybe I can contribute to next year's entertainment?