

## **Evaluation and Social Work Practice**

*Shaw, I.F. and Lishman, J. (eds) (1999) London: Sage, £16.99, paperback, 256 pp.*

This book is a collection of thirteen edited chapters from different contributors, each presenting their perspective on the nature of evaluation and research and their application to practice. The editors aim to provide a 'comprehensive treatment of the central issues confronting evaluation in social work', however, their claims that it is likely to appeal to students, researchers and practitioners are perhaps over-ambitious.

The opening chapters cover methodological and philosophical issues associated with research and the nature of evaluation as well as competing views on the nature of 'evidence based practice' and empirical knowledge. Shaw's chapter on 'Evidence for Practice' takes us through the complex and philosophically dense field of research perspectives, their epistemological claims and resultant issues, drawing on developments from the UK, USA and Australia. Shaw's chapter is intellectually demanding and encourages the reader to begin the internal process of how to evaluate research, explores the nature of evaluation and concludes by encouraging the reader in 'selective ploughing of some of the major evaluation theorists' (p.35). However, such exhortations are most likely to appeal to academics and research students. For undergraduate students and practitioners, Shaw's chapter is less likely to inspire a quest for evaluative methodologies and may serve to perpetuate the oft-quoted gap between theory and practice.

Reid and Zettergren provide a historical overview of the empirical practice movement and its growing impact on contemporary practice and social research. They consider critical methodological issues associated with such a perspective and, like all contributors in this book, concede the need for critical reappraisal of any assumed perspective. However, the chapter draws heavily on the American culture of empirical practice which has relied on single system design (SSD) methods as a means of service evaluation; such an approach has had less impact in the UK. However, readers can gain a clearer understanding of SSD methodologies from Bloom's chapter in this volume on single system evaluation.

The move towards qualitative practice evaluations begins with Gould's chapter and, whilst it covers methodological and philosophical issues and concerns, it is more likely to appeal to students and practitioners who can draw on their education and training and practice experience as a way of beginning to evaluate their personal and professional development. Indeed, as Gould claims, since there is a growing body of knowledge which draws parallels between social work practice and qualitative methods of inquiry, qualitative methods are more likely to capture the student's and practitioner's 'sociological imagination'. The quest for evaluative methodologies gathers pace thereafter, beginning with Dullea and Mullender espousing the need for participatory research. Such concerns are echoed in the following chapters, which cover feminist evaluation, collaborative evaluation with service users, and the use of histories to evaluate practice in social work. Chapters 9 and 10 are particularly valuable in that they focus on key skills of practice, namely observation and the use of interviews and draw out their validity as methodologies for evaluating practice. All these chapters (5 to 10) provide practice examples which are inspiring to the reader and support the editors' call for evaluation to become a 'direct dimension of practice' (p.8).

Ruckdeschel's chapter promotes the use of qualitative methodologies, but it does seem out of place in the context of the preceding chapters. Perhaps it is aiming at a note of caution for those who lack the skills and motivation for analysis, for as Ruckdeschel says, 'qualitative methods are generally speaking time consuming and difficult to master' (p.186) and 'collecting, organising and analysing textual material is tedious'(p.187). Whilst he may be making a valid point, the effect of the chapter is distinctly dispiriting and seems out of place.

Vanstone's final chapter on behavioural and cognitive interventions illustrates the utility of empirical methods of evaluation in the field of working with offenders. For practitioners,

Vanstone's text is illuminating in that it draws on research of 'what works' and identifies the moral component of evaluation. We are reminded that research and evaluation are not just simply about what is known, or becomes known, but equally about what has been omitted. In work with offenders, Vanstone illustrates not only what works, but that the success of such (empirical) approaches have 'come perilously near to minimising the importance of more general work on structural problems such as poverty and unemployment' (p.230).

Although '*Evaluation and Social Work Practice*' is comprehensive in its breadth, as an edited collection, the book has an uneasy flow. Research or evaluation texts typically adopt one style or another - a theoretical or applied text - and whilst the book claims an attempt at the latter, there is an uneasy overlap between the two approaches. The book would have benefited more from more signposting. Chapters 2 - 4 and Chapter 11 are concerned mainly with methodological and epistemological concerns and are strongly biased towards readers with expertise in this field – academics or advanced researchers. The middle half of the book (chapters 5-10) should find an audience with the reflective practitioner and those keen to embark on practice evaluation.

The main strength of the text lies in its central commitment towards participative research and self-reflective evaluation and a move away from managerial styles of evaluation. However, the absence of a concluding chapter by the editors may have contributed to a lack of overall coherence, since at times the book appears to be appealing to two very different audiences. This collection is more likely to appeal to advanced researchers and academics, rather than the practitioners who remain largely excluded by the methodological discourse on research and evaluation. Thus, the editors' aim for evaluation to become a dimension of practice is unrealised.

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**Immigration Controls, the Family and the Welfare State: a handbook of law, theory, politics and practice**

*Steve Cohen (2001) London: Jessica Kingsley, £17.95, paperback, 367 pp.*

This book is ambitious and topical. The extent of its ambition is evident from the subtitle - a handbook of law, theory, politics and practice for local authority, voluntary sector and welfare state workers and legal advisors. Its provocative stance, that fair immigration controls are an impossibility, is apparent throughout the book. Pace, structure, a wealth of practical detail and comment make this a stimulating read. The book unfortunately fails to deliver the promise of the subtitle although it is doubtful whether any one book could.

The most interesting and controversial aspect of the book is Cohen's argument that there is a critical relationship between the welfare state and the existence of immigration controls. He briefly charts the history of the twentieth century and suggests that increases in welfare provision are invariably accompanied by increases in immigration controls. He uses his extensive knowledge of Jewish immigration to support his thesis. This approach would have benefited from further consideration. For instance recent developments within social security have changed the balance between contributory and means tested benefits, making means

tested benefits more important in the relief of poverty. This must make the benefit system more available to immigrants; so, paradoxically, means testing would provide a positive underpinning to the type of borderless world he would like to see. Similarly the creation of a more flexible and less unionised workforce over the last 20 years must make the UK economy more attractive to immigrant labour. For an obvious left-winger, these are important contradictions Cohen needs to address.

Cohen's thesis would have been enriched by comparisons with the changing immigration policies of other countries, in particular those of the more organised capitalist economies in Western Europe which have retained commitment to an insurance based welfare state for those deemed to have satisfied residence/naturalisation requirements. For instance, in Germany there are demands that citizenship rights should only follow the acquisition of language and cultural knowledge, thus equating citizenship with German identity. Finally, although there is some strength in his point, he cannot ignore the simplistic argument that the current tightening of immigration controls is a response to the unprecedented numbers of refugees, estimated at 21 million, searching for new homes and the lack of clear international leadership in the management of this phenomenon.

Whilst Cohen is correct in stating that immigration law and policy have largely been ignored in accounts of the welfare state, his own perspective is arguably equally narrow. The control of immigration is only one example of social exclusion and how the state regulates those who are excluded. It would have been very interesting to consider the extent to which increasing immigration control is illustrative of some of the current themes of governance, particularly new public management, privatisation and partnership, central/local relationships and the increasing social control and surveillance of all welfare recipients.

The book is useful in making apparent the interdisciplinary and pervasive nature of immigration controls and therefore will be of interest to the broad readership Cohen claims. For instance, in the chapter on housing services and immigration status, Cohen not only describes the complex regulatory framework governing housing entitlement and the dispersal system set up under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, he also provides useful information on the repairing and health and safety obligations of landlords and the National Asylum Support Services. In the chapter 'Immigration law versus child protection law' he illustrates how the potential conflict between the welfare principles of the Children Act and immigration law is mostly resolved in favour of immigration control. Sometimes however, the breadth of approach leads to a lack of clarity. In contrasting domestic adoption law with adoptions of overseas children he suggests that the issue in domestic cases is 'the child's best interests' which is an oversimplification. In addition at times the author's need to make a political point also obscures clarity. For example, he refers to the provisions in the 1999 Act to regulate the provision of immigration advice. He makes the point that 'the scheme is open to criticism on issues of principle, not least the potential it gives for banning politically committed advisors while not doing anything to increase the numbers of good ones' and 'the only way to abolish crooked immigration advisors is to abolish immigration controls.' The needs of his likely readership would have been better served by making the legal position explicit.

For this reader Cohen's polemical and adversarial style distracts from the value of the information he provides. More seriously he assumes his readers understand what he means by racism in the context of immigration law and how it is distinct from the perceived need to protect national interests and he fails to take his own argument to its logical conclusion and provide us with a paradigm of a society without immigration controls. It becomes impossible to engage in the debate which Cohen says he would like to stimulate when those who disagree with his position are tagged Nazi, racist or anti-working class. This is a pity as balanced and informed debate is in very short supply.

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### **Using Evidence in Health and Social Care**

*Gomm, R. and Davies, C. (eds) (2000) London: Sage, £15.99, paperback, 272pp.*

Gomm and Davies make it clear in their preface that this is a book aimed at practitioners who 'want to read research and apply it in practice and not for people who want to do research themselves'. The volume is divided into two parts, concerned, respectively, with 'Evidence for Practice' (Part 1) and 'Putting Research into Practice (Part 2)'. In my view, however, Part 1 serves as a good introductory text, which would go some way towards tempering the excesses and shortcomings which can result from insufficient consideration being given to the important issues surrounding the context and purpose of research. The collection crosses disciplinary boundaries and further extends its appeal by spanning a wider range of methodological approaches.

The 'rigorous scepticism' to which Brechin and Sidell refer (p.12) characterises contributions to this volume. They start by quoting at length the exchange between the computer and two representatives of humankind depicted in *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by the late Douglas Adams. This sets the tone for this edited collection, which provides a challenging, wide-ranging and sometimes mischievous approach to the question of how to interpret and use research evidence. Contributors use to good advantage engaging examples of research on topics as diverse as blood letting, bed-wetting, breast-feeding, child abuse, consumer satisfaction, hospital closure, implementation of guidelines, and management of hypertension.

The first chapter does a sterling job of outlining, in an accessible manner, the different 'ways of knowing', methodological and disciplinary approaches which have been brought to bear on the creation of evidence. This is achieved without getting bogged down either in esoteric philosophical debates or in impassioned pleas for specific models of research. Gomm's next chapter on 'Making Sense of Surveys' continues this measured approach, highlighting the trade-offs with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of the variety of methods at researchers' disposal. He also acknowledges the range of uses to which findings can be put, depending on the nature of the claims being made. He concludes: 'In a sense all research findings are research artefacts. In order to appraise research it is necessary to do some 'reverse engineering': that is, to dismantle it and see how it was put together' (p.42).

Johnson (Chapter 4) emphasises the importance, in evaluating research, for the practitioner - and, indeed, any other reader - to ask throughout, 'What is the relevance of this piece of research for *me*?' This adds a welcome voice of pragmatism to somewhat ratified current debates concerning the development of overarching templates for systematic reviews which tend to rely on a strict adherence to a hierarchy of evidence. Although Johnson's personal reflections on her own research career are illuminating, she underplays the potential of reflexivity as a resource in safeguarding against researchers 'being misled by their own preferences' (Gomm, p.48). Thus, she passes up an opportunity to provide equivalent suggestions in the spirit of Gomm's clear and helpful table relating to 'confounding in experiments' (pp.49-50).

Hart and Bond's chapter on action research emphasises the importance of the cyclical framework underpinning this method. Following Gomm and Davies' example in maintaining an open-minded approach to paradigmatic disputes, Hart and Bond demonstrate the range of studies which can be involved with four case studies, including a large scale controlled trial. The discussion on generalisability, however, is disappointing and could have been enhanced

by cross-referring both to Johnson's discussion of theory and Gomm's excellent Chapter 9 on the transferability of research findings.

Eby's Chapter on 'Producing Evidence Ethically' provides a brief history of the concern with ethics in research and gives practical guidance for the practitioner-reviewer in asking relevant questions of research studies spanning the whole research spectrum. She manages to avoid taking a sanctimonious stance, concluding that the challenge for both researchers and practitioners is in judging research 'in terms of how well it keeps its balance between rigour and respect' (p.125).

All but one of the chapters in Part 2 are written by Gomm, which lends greater cohesion. Gill Needham's chapter takes up the challenge of accounting for and making suggestions as to how to bridge the gap between evidence and practice. She outlines both the promise and limitations of a range of strategies for disseminating and implementing research findings, neatly and systematically summarizing the evidence available for each strategy in an informative table (pp.141-2). In passing, Needham points out that evidence-based practice is itself a social movement and comments that practitioners are likely to be most receptive when messages from research correspond with what they think already.

Gomm's final four chapters provide a robust summary of the volume and build up a picture of how further links between evidence and practice might be constructively pursued. He describes the influence of both research findings and government targets on management information systems and addresses the many challenges involved in relating research findings to practice. Gomm's Chapter 10 provides a de-mystified tour of cost-effectiveness and cost-utility studies, whilst conceding that even costs may be determined largely by local factors. He returns to this theme in his final chapter on 'Evidence for Planning Services', assembling fictional details of preparing a Single Regeneration Bid, which draw on his own experience with three such bids. This is, in itself, an innovative way of presenting evidence. The concluding chapter looks at the role of routinely collected data, the different ways of calculating deprivation indexes (which have benefits for some areas and disadvantages for others); Geographical Information Systems (GIS); surveys and public consultation exercises (such as citizens' juries and focus groups). Avoiding the 'onwards and upwards' tone of some other writing on these topics, Gomm acknowledges that there can be problems with developing services as a rapid response to public demand.

In summary, this collection provides a clear explication and thoughtful discussion of the wide range of issues involved in using evidence in health and social care. The comprehensive appendix lists information sources, dividing these into printed sources, electronic sources and projects, initiatives or organisations. For discussion of techniques of accessing information, we are referred to the companion volume *Evaluating Research in Health and Social Care*. If, as I suspect, this meets the same high standards, as does the volume reviewed here, then they are likely to have produced a formidable double act.

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