Merely experts? Reflections on the history of social work, science and research

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Abstract

Early social work was often associated with a strong position on the congruity of practice and science. I illustrate this through the stance of the UK Charity Organization Society, and early developments in Chicago University. One consequence of this was the development of major effectiveness studies in the UK and USA. The crisis of confidence that resulted from studies in the 1960s and 1970s helped to prompt a range of research developments, most of which continue to the present. Yet there are several linked new developments in current UK social work. I conclude with some reflections on the forms that arguments take about the relationship between social work and science.

Keywords: Science, history, social work, research

The title of this brief paper has an intended modesty and collective self-deprecation. These are 'reflections' on social work, science, research and evaluation[1] rather than a carefully worked analysis. By asking 'merely?', I give away one stance on their relationship that I regard as important and challenging for those of us who do one or both of science and social work.

Science and social work – each conceived in various ways at different times – stand in a relationship of constant and perhaps inevitable tension. I open the paper with a few observations about attitudes to science during the history of social work. I then spend some time working through several historical moments of social work, organized thematically rather than in careful linear sequence, sometimes focusing on the UK, sometimes on the USA and sometimes speaking more generally. Finally, I return to the opening theme and to say something more formal about the relationship between social work and science/research/evaluation, as it was viewed historically. The paper had its origins in an invitation to reflect on this theme. I have deliberately left some of the more personal touches, the unduly broad sweep, naming some names of institutions and people whose work I respect, and

possibly idiosyncratic judgements and opinions of the spoken word. This risks, as a gentle editorial reminder drew to my attention, falling through thin ice, and I welcome any expressions of disagreement.

Science and social work

I was shaped in aspects of my early thinking by Noel Timms' *Language of Social Casework*. He refers to attitudes to science in social work in its early history. It is fairly easy to detect instances of optimism and hope for the gains social work would obtain from science. Charles Loch (founder of the London-based Charity Organization Society in the 1860s) argued that charity "is not spasmodic, casual and emotional, but, like science, an all-observing, all-comprising intelligence. It is not antagonistic to science: it is science - the science of life – in operation – knowledge doing its perfect work" (Timms, 1968, p.59). Early social work writing tended to exhibit confidence in science as displaying laws of human behaviour, and to refer to behaviour being 'determined', and to faith in the model of the natural sciences. This last remark is probably anachronistic in that, to contemporary social workers, there may not have seemed to be any choice about which

model of science from which to work. The issue was being debated within European social philosophy of the time and, what we now regard as, the humanist and interpretive tradition had its roots in that period in the work of Willhelm Dilthey and the emerging work of Max Weber (c.f. Hughes, 1980), but I have not been able to trace any evidence that the social work community of the time was engaging with that work.

I suspect that this optimism continues as a persisting thread throughout the subsequent history of social work, surfacing from time to time in the relatively absolutist form to which Loch adhered. Take, for instance, Joel Fischer's only slightly hedged prophecy of the end of ideology, with his prediction as recently as 1993 that "by the year 2000, empirically based practice – the new social work – may be the norm or well on the way to becoming so" (Fischer, 1993, p.55).

The late 19th Century confidence in science was linked with trends in Christian thought and action. This was in part a secularizing process. Beatrice Webb, in her autobiography, recalled the "current belief in the scientific method ... and the consciousness of a new motive: the transfer of the emotion of self sacrificing service from God to man" (Webb, 1929, p.130)[2]. But it was equally the manifestation of a series of almost seismic shifts within the Christian church of the time. The Charity Organization Society (in both the UK and the USA) and the university settlement movements (prominently associated with the universities at Oxford and Chicago) were associated in their formative stages with Christian Socialism, which, when mingled with Victorian Romanticism and progressive social evolutionism, produced an urgent search for the image of God 'in the most fallen and debased of the human race' (Burrow, 1966; c.f. Fine, 1979). Early sociology and social work were strongly associated with several of these strands, such that for example, Chicago University

was a Baptist foundation, and the early Chicago sociologists included among prominent leaders those who came from an expressly religious background. "Some of the impetus for the development of sociology in the United States came from the 'social gospel' movement within American Protestantism" (Diner, 1997, p.44).

Social work has faced recurrent stark categorizations such as advocacy/ care/control or change/maintenance. These took early shape in the emergence of social work. Charles Loch, for example, was the person perhaps most responsible for the idea of casework. Yet the charity organization societies in the UK and the USA developed in some tension with the reform-minded settlement movement first at Toynbee Hall, Oxford, and later in New York and more widely in the States. Stephen Diner, referring to the USA, expresses it nicely:

> *Professional social work in the United States developed from an imperfect union between the late nineteenth-century "scientific charity" movement ... on the one hand and the slightly younger social settlement movement, with its strong orientation towards social reform and social survey on the other.* (Diner, 1977, p.3)

Alongside this there was a tension from the first between scholarly aspirations and employer demands for training, specialisms and practical curricula – this remains social work's "troublesome legacy" (Lubove, 1965, p.143) to the present.

There can also be found doubts about science, though less often in writing. "This is partly because such a position is often viewed as essentially a moral one, which can be stated only with difficulty and argued not at all" (Timms, 1968, p.60). Scepticism regarding the methods of science also may be persistent through the history of social work, whether it be the therapeutically

inclined Elizabeth Irvine bemoaning that "science deals splendidly with all that can be weighed, measured and counted, but this involves excluding from the universe of discourse the intangible, the imponderable, all that cannot be reduced to statistics" (Irvine, 1969, p.4), more contemporary doubts expressed through feminist criticisms of masculinist methodology, or arguments for inquiry led by engaging critically in the political agenda. At different positions between these poles can be found the moderate scepticism expressed in the closing paragraphs of this paper, the more modest claims of Kirk and Reid (2002) or the early quotation from 1923, that:

> *Whether there be a science in all this or not, the problems are to be studied and solved in scientific ways – by openmindedness, by use of the teachings of experience, by efforts to see causes and results.* (Lubove, 1965, p.142)

Moments in social work history

The aside regarding Chicago links to one of the most significant periods and episodes in the early history of social work and sociology - the events leading to the separate establishment of the School of Social Service Administration at Chicago and the founding of the Journal *Social Service Review*. Chicago was far from being a microcosm of either discipline. For many years social work research and training in the school has taken a distinct, almost unique line in the USA. But it is interesting because it exemplifies in stark and sometimes innovative ways how a tension between scholarly objectivity and the desire for advocacy has been present throughout the history of social work.

Across the States, efforts to develop a scientifically grounded method of modifying individual behaviour were the central concern of the 1920s. Following the separation of the Department of Sociology and the School of Social Service

Administration in 1920, Edith Abott and Sophonisba Breckinridge formed the *Social Service Review* in 1927 with the aspiration of undertaking important work that would combine intellectual challenge with social usefulness. These remarkably able and influential women were exceptional in their commitment to research (c.f. essays on them in Deegan, 1991[3]). In fact, the flavour of their intellectual commitment set them somewhat apart from the other influential women at Chicago, some of whom opposed the merger of the social work training with the university, fearing that a practical orientation would not be maintained in the university. However, Abott and Breckinridge had clear views about the kind of research that was needed:

1. It should solve practical problems and not simply advance the frontiers of human knowledge;
2. It had to be good research. They complained that "some of our social science friends are afraid that we cannot be scientific because we really care about what we are doing ..." (Diner, 1977, p.11);
3. They believed that practitioners must have the skills to contribute to research. Research could not be carried out solely by social scientists. "Social workers must be so trained scientifically that they belong in the social science group" (Abbott, in Diner, 1977, p.11).

Viewing these three points as a whole, they have enduring interest. They face both ways, in that they challenge both social work and social science – a stance I find attractive (c.f. Shaw & Gould, 2001, Chapter 1; Shaw, 2005). It is not clear of course how far these exhortations were borne out in social work practice[4]. Other schools were viewed as holding a different position from Chicago, and not including research within social work training. Abbott and Breckinridge held the interesting view that "such training is needed for the sake of

social research itself, which so often demands a competent understanding of the field of social treatment ... and should be carried out by social workers, who are also trained in social research" (Diner, 1977, p.12).

Strangely, the early years of the Journal carried very few research papers, and the few that appeared seemed to be from students (Diner, 1977, p.31). However, there *were* stimuli to research. In the UK this came partly from the advent of psychodynamic social work and within the child guidance clinics. In the USA there was a reform-minded social survey movement, and also a move to develop outcome studies from the late '20s onwards. The survey movement had some similarities to post-war Fabian social policy research in Britain, aiming to provide unbiased data that would stimulate action.

The early confidence in science flowered in the experimental outcome studies that started in the 1930s and went through to the early 1970s. Perhaps Ernest Burgess, the prominent Chicago sociologist, presaged this in 1923 when he claimed "there can be no doubt that social work is moving with increasing momentum toward research" and to the "experimental study of human behaviour" (Burgess, 1923, p.376, p.368). But several major studies in the late 60s yielded depressing apparent evidence that social work was not effective: e.g. in the USA the Chemung County study (Wallace, 1967); *Girls at Vocational High* (Meyer *et al.*, 1965) and in the UK *Helping the Aged* (Goldberg, 1970), the IMPACT studies in Probation (e.g. Folkard, 1974), and Clarke and Cornish' study of a therapeutic community for young offenders in Bristol (Clarke & Cornish, 1972).

This led to a period of sharp introspection, and what Kirk and Reid describe as the 'effectiveness crisis', reflected for example in Fischer's review of effectiveness (Fischer, 1976), reviews of *Girls at Vocational High* and several other retrospective pieces e.g. in UK Probation. We can detect two kinds of response in these. First, that the problem is poor practice (this was Fischer's line); second, that poor research was the problem. Kirk and Reid (2002) suggest that both were at fault. Whatever our conclusion, it led to a diversification of research, stimulated partly by this debate but also by other developments such as programmes of positive discrimination in the USA and UK, the influence of qualitative approaches to social science, and so on. In no particular order, I would pick out among these diversifying research developments:

- A *Research and Development* approach. The Reid and Shyne study of brief and extended casework was one of the few studies that seemed to yield clear positive messages (Reid & Shyne, 1969). Reid followed this with a lifelong development of task-centred intervention. It also led to research on the intervention process (still upheld by Mullen at Columbia). Some of this was fairly continuous in stance with previous outcome studies, while some has gradually been more influenced by inductive and qualitative stances.

- *Qualitative Research*. This was – and still is - relatively stronger in the UK and Nordic countries than in the USA, although the North American scene may be changing through the work of Reissman, Gilgun, Padgett, Ruckdeschel, Witkin, O'Connor and a new generation of younger scholars such as Ungar, Staller and Poindexter. This was consolidated in the major volume by Sherman and Reid (1994), and its successor (Miller & Reid, in press), and current foci have been found in the Norman Denzin annual qualitative research congress and the launch of the *Qualitative Social Work* journal (http://qsw.sagepub.com).

- Taking the *voice of the service user* seriously in research. Mayer and Timms (1970) was the first and most influential of these studies. There was a spell of such studies till the late '70s but the growth of more empowerment-led approaches to research weakened the consumer-study approach, which was criticised for a too neutral stance on data.

- The effectiveness crisis was explained partly in the perceived difficulties of applying group data to practice. *Case-based approaches to effectiveness research*, e.g. single system designs, emerged as a partial response to this criticism. Martin Bloom in the States (Bloom, 1993, 1999) and Kazi (1998) in the UK have been associated with this approach.

- *Action research* emerged less as a response to concerns about the apparent lack of effectiveness of intervention programmes and more as a spin-off from major political commitments to positive discrimination and addressing racism in the USA in the 1960s. This led to action research as part of community organization, and in the UK the Home Office sponsored Community Development Projects took a wholly different line to mainstream social work research, influenced in part by a remarkable cluster of politically radical project staff.

- *Government programme research* was a further influential development from this period. Take, for example, the Home Office research programme in probation studies from the 1960s and 1970s. This was perhaps the most impressive of all social work related government funded research programmes in the UK. Its sheer volume and methodological seriousness mark it out. Davies,

Folkard, Clarke, and Sinclair were all contributing to this work. While it was in part a contributor to the string of effectiveness studies, the diversity of method and quality of research influenced a generation of probation officers and may have contributed to the relatively large proportion of former probation officers now in UK universities.

Where are we now? The trends identified above have continued to the present, alongside a focusing of interest in the potential of evidence-based practice, and systematic review methodologies. These developments have been the subject of wide discussion, and I do not intend to rehearse this familiar territory (Shaw, 2006). I think the present decade has been one of the most interesting for academic social work in the UK for rather different reasons.

A seminar series on 'Theorizing Social Work Research' was funded through the ESRC at the turn of the century. I am fairly certain that this will be seen as the event that opened up a series of important initiatives in the following five years. This has been associated with a shift in the national leadership of social work research in the UK towards people with a less substantive focus and a strong interest in generic methodological rigour, a growing active international network, and a value-led approach to research. The leading role of substantive research at universities like Bristol and York[5] is still there, but the rise of social work research at universities like Huddersfield, Southampton and Cardiff – all known not only for substantive fields but for discipline interest and strong social science links, especially to sociology – has helped foster a greater sense of a national community of scholarly work[6].

This trend has been enhanced by the growing influence of networks like the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC) and to some

degree the Association of Professors of Social Work, which have operated as a national voice, whether or not they are entirely representative of the community. They have played a key part in a growing and to some degree successful pressure for social work to be treated as a discipline. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has proved amenable to lobbying from this grouping, and to the case made through a national research strategy (JUC SWEC, 2006). This includes the development of a case for resourcing capacity and competence strengthening in social work. There may be some serendipity in these developments. For example, the contemporaneous emergence of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and its knowledge development programme has begun to provide a bridge between academic work and knowledge utilization.

A further focus for the development of a research agenda emerged with the first national social work research conference in the UK in 2007. The influence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has also proved relevant, leading to a greater transparency of research effort and publishing outputs. The growth of number and perhaps standards of UK social work journals has doubtless been pushed forward by the RAE.

Perspective from close in is tricky. However, it is likely that future commentators will also identify the present period as one where the counter claims of globalization and resurgent faith-based positions will be significant. For social work research, this appears to have prompted a wider awareness of cross-cultural connections, the challenge of indigenization, and the difficulties that attach to solely western conceptions of the social work research process. I regard the growth of ICTs as important here although the eventual net impact of ICT on social work research is hard to discern.

The user research movement has been the other significant hallmark of social work research in the 1990s and first years of the new century. While some of this research takes place outside the universities, the gradual institutionalization of user research interests in organizations like SCIE and the JSWEC (Joint Social Work Education Conference) annual event has established user interests as approaching a standing challenge and agenda for much social work research.

There may be something of a pattern in these developments. There is a confidence in the academic community, and a sense of discipline identity. Though there are huge differences from eighty years ago, I detect some points of contact with the Chicago 'project'.

Social work and science relationships

To return in closing to the opening theme, is social work a science? Of course, all depends on what one means by 'science'. Timms (1968) identified three senses in which early writers thought social work was a science.

First, social work was seen as a science in that it applied laws of human behaviour. In Loch's terms, it almost 'obeyed' them. This is now rare, though some strong psychodynamic models are close to this. We have lost the confidence in science in society that marked the 19th Century with Darwin, the Huxleys, Galton's faith in eugenics, and so on.

Second, some early social workers thought that social work was logically like science. This is a very different and more interesting idea. For example, early writers and right through to the '60s suggested it was like science because it was deductive. The COS in the USA argued like this. The classic example is Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* (Richmond, 1917). It is not clear whether social work practice has ever been

hypothesis-testing like that. Indeed, neither is it self-apparent that science is generally like that. Philosophers such as Michael Polanyi preceded many now working in the sociology of science field, in arguing that there are unspecifiable knowledge elements that cannot be stated as propositions but are indispensable. This is a kind of categorisation that is quite different, e.g. intuitive.

Insofar as this is the case, science does not have a single logic. I admire Ray Pawson and colleagues' work on types of knowledge in social care (Pawson *et al.*, 2003). It is bold and imaginative. But I am not convinced that we can unify quality criteria for knowledge in the way they hope[7].

Some suggest that social work and science both proceed in a similar problem-solving way. Kirk and Reid give some interesting examples from early social work. Nick Gould and I have discussed this in some detail (Shaw & Gould, 2001). It is interesting but not straightforward. Bloom (1999) gives an example of where he sees the many parallels between social work and single system evaluation, while authors such as Padgett forcefully demur (e.g. Padgett, 1998). I have tried to set out how I see analogies between qualitative methods and practice (Shaw, 1996) through a process of 'translating' for practice.

This does not exhaust the forms in which arguments for social work as science can be put forward. The third sense in which this claim can be made is through the argument that social work is science as technology. All the talk of social work 'skills', and use of the 'tool' metaphor suggest this idea. The R and D model of research mentioned previously is also technology based. There is now a new form of this issue with the growth of assistive technology. A pending special issue of the *British Journal of Social Work* on social work and technology illustrates the range of these developments.

But in all we should not expect too much from science, research or evaluation. Often the social work community has been too optimistic. I like the words of Socrates:

> *… and if you stay barren [of conceptions of knowledge] you'll be less burdensome to those who associate with you, and gentler; because you'll have the sense not to think you know things which in fact you don't know.* (Plato, *Theaetetus* p.168)

Or, to bring it more up to date, taking the golem – the creature of Jewish mythology – as a metaphor for science, Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, in their captivating book, seek:

> *… to explain the golem that is science. We aim to show that it is not an evil creature but it is a little daft. Golem Science is not to be blamed for its mistake; they are our mistakes. A golem cannot be blamed if it is doing its best. But we must not expect too much. A golem, powerful though it is, is the creature of our art and our craft.* (Collins & Pinch, 1998, p.2)

Furthermore, "scientists are neither Gods nor charlatans; they are merely experts" (p.143).

Acknowledgement

Footnotes
[1] 'Evaluation' came as a late 20th Century term within social work, influenced no doubt by the emergence of the evaluation discipline/profession in the USA since the 1960s. I use the language of the times from which my material is drawn.

[2] Moving decades later, it is possible to find welcomes for science from writers as diverse as the early Peter Leonard, Derek Jehu and Florence Hollis.

[3] Deegan has made a major contribution to understanding the gendered nature of early sociology. While her primary interest is in sociology rather than social work, there are fruitful inferences to be drawn regarding women's views of science and practice.

[4] The problem is not restricted to the 1920s. I have recently been sent the engagingly naive memoirs of a social worker who trained at Columbia in the 1950s. Despite training in a leading school, he recalls that "In my experience, practitioners were not interested in research" (Hunter, 2006, p.99).

[5] York's reputation for substantive excellence is independent of the present author.

[6] Naming universities risks counter-claims. But for illustrative purposes I stand by them.

[7] Reflections of this kind raise, needless to say, more questions than they answer. Matthew Norton and I have offered empirical evidence regarding quality criteria in social work research (Shaw & Norton, 2007).

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