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## RESEARCHING PRACTICE WISDOM IN SOCIAL WORK

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### ABSTRACT

#### Researching practice wisdom in social work

Social workers, as skilled helpers who make professional decisions using intuitive actions rather than by following defined rules, deserve better recognition for their practice wisdom. However, since there is a tendency amongst practitioners who adhere to the evidence-based paradigm to disregard practitioners' knowledge, empirical research on practice wisdom in social work needs to be encouraged. The author argues that the lack of a sound methodology hinders the development of such an invaluable asset for practitioners. It is suggested that a heuristic paradigm that embraces the concepts of tacit knowing, intuition and indwelling will provide a way forward towards recognizing the importance of social workers' practice wisdom.

#### Keywords

Practice wisdom, practical wisdom, tacit knowledge, heuristics, research methodology

## INTRODUCTION

Research on professional decision-making has a strong interdisciplinary flavour and is evolving rapidly in the field. Goldman (2006) asks: how can an expert be distinguished from a layperson, in a cognitive sense? The question is certainly easier to ask than to answer. For human service professionals, turning our expertise into objectivity can be a source of just as much contention as regarding professional decisions as totally intuitive. Social workers are generally not opposed to the appeal of evidence-based practice (EBP) (Okpych & Yu, 2014). However, while academics have been preoccupied with empirical data, the soft, flexible and spontaneous practice wisdom of practitioners has been downplayed or sacrificed. Tyson (1994) suggests that some social workers have found research based on the positivist paradigm far from practical, since the findings provide information that is irrelevant to their practical experience. Practitioners are thus faced with deep ambivalence toward EBP because there are two diverging trends in understanding the constitution of social work's knowledge, i.e. a view of social work as a science, or as an art (Bent-Goodley, 2015). Discussing practice wisdom, including common sense, practice-based knowledge, tacit knowledge and process knowledge, is not a new agenda in the field of social work (Gray & Schubert, 2013). Nevertheless, it remains debatable whether it is possible to be cognitively aware of the non-cognitive facets of one's thoughts. By considering social work as an applied science or technology, the rationalist/technological model tends to distance itself from the intuitive knowledge of social workers (Saleebey, 1989). Yet, social workers' professional decisions are inevitably based on their own judgements to a certain extent. Professional decision makers should always be critically aware of and act on the contexts in which the decisions are being made. Practice wisdom should therefore appeal to a broad readership in social work research.

The objectives of this paper are fourfold. Firstly, the author argues that social work is more intuition-based than evidence-based. The professional intuition of social workers is context-specific and the practice wisdom of social work should be cultivated through intersubjective encounters with clients. Secondly, the study of practice wisdom should be opened up for more debate and development. Thirdly, a heuristic paradigm that embraces the concepts of tacit knowing, intuition and indwelling is recommended as a suitable channel through which to research the unexplored enigma of practice wisdom in social work. Fourthly, youth work is conceived as a showcase for the research of practice wisdom. Youth workers are suggested as co-researchers in the course of heuristic inquiry. Practitioner research should then be encouraged in order to enrich the knowledge base of social work.

## **A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL INTUITION**

A professional practitioner with practice wisdom should be able to feel or “just know” what the right course of action is in a specific context (Schwartz, 2011). Intuition, intuitive knowledge, or unconscious knowledge operates beneath the surface and guides recognitions, judgements or predictions that are readily available but not always appropriate (Sadler-Smith, 2008). Intuition is about letting go of control, mastery and problem-solving. It is an “act of faith” and an “art in action” (Palmer, 2002, p. 197). For Klein (2004), “we can’t trust it [intuition], but we can’t live without it” (p. 3). Professional intuition refers to an automatic response that arises effortlessly in a practitioner’s mind without immediate justification (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Gigerenzer (2007) argues that good intuitions ignore information; this notion that “less is more” contradicts our core beliefs that (1) more information is always better and (2) more choice is always better. Based on the work of the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon (1955) on decision-making and problem-solving, Klein (2004) contends that gathering and analysing all the facts before making any important decision is almost impossible. In fact, “the more complex the decision, the faster the complications add up” (Klein, 2004, p. 5). There is an increasing emphasis on and interest in the use of intuition by professionals such as nurses (Allen, 1999) and psychologists (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Researchers adopt various models and strategies, such as recognition-primed decisions (RPD), naturalistic decision-making (NDM) and cognitive task analysis (CTA), to identify possible cues and patterns that experts use to make their judgements. Although there have been countless discussions regarding the intuitive sixth sense that enables professionals to determine “what is right” and “what is not right”, the study of professional intuition has seldom focused specifically on social work. The professional intuition of social workers is developed through intersubjective encounters with clients and is then reshaped and stored as part of the practitioner’s work experience knowledge. Nonetheless, social work is a profession like no other. The skills involved are not based merely on identifying and recalling patterns. Rather, they are exceptionally context-specific. The author argues that practice wisdom in social work includes but is not limited to professional intuition. This will be explained further in the next section.

## **WHAT IS PRACTICE WISDOM IN SOCIAL WORK?**

What makes social work unique? The answer does not lie in its cross-disciplinary nature, nor does it merely emphasize the importance of person-in-environment. Rather, the irreplaceable practice wisdom (Chu & Tsui, 2008; Klein & Bloom, 1995) in social work is formed by prudent and embodied encounters with the social world. Social workers work with their intuitions, which are

"unusually sound, unusually fluent, and accessible, and subject to unusually careful evaluation" (England, 1986, p. 39). An experienced social work practitioner may possess the ability not to have to think "prior to" or "during" a performance. Allen-Meares & DeRoos (1994) provide an example of an experienced social worker who can read body language and react appropriately "without resorting to conscious reflection on the meaning of the client's posture or movement" (p. 40). However, such an ability can also be egocentric, uninformed, irrational or without foundation (Mishlove, 1994). As such, the consequences can be negative for clients if practitioners use it as their only basis for practice (Carew, 1987). Gut feeling or intuition is the "heart's choice" of practitioners (Gigerenzer, 2007). Intuitive judgements, which can "suddenly 'pop' into conscious awareness as a bodily sense" (Sadler-Smith, 2008, p. 23), may guide us through decision-making. As social work has entered the postmodern era, science, art, rationality, intuition and systematic knowledge have come together (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 1998). It is not difficult to understand why Gammack (1982) refers to intuition as an uncommon sense on the part of social workers. Practitioners need to be in communion with their gut feelings (Isenberg, 1989; Klein, 2004; Sadler-Smith, 2008) or their "sixth sense" (Hogarth, 2001) and enjoy the benefits of forgetting and ignorance (Gigerenzer, 2007). Social workers are able to sense a problem, react rapidly through well-learned behaviour patterns, synthesize isolated elements of data, circumvent rational analysis and bypass in-depth thinking (Isenberg, 1989). Intuitive practice includes the capacity to "be present with the client, immersed in experience and absorbed in the process" (Nye, 2012, p. 127).

The practice wisdom of a social worker (Klein & Bloom, 1995) is unique in determining the help that he or she provides (England, 1986). It is a well-earned professional intuition rather than a bias that a practitioner should seek to avoid. Discussion of practice wisdom includes but is not limited to "experiences". Back in the age of Aristotle, it was discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* that, "practical wisdom is a true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things good and bad for a human being". In spite of its falsifiable nature, even a professional decision made by a doctor can be less scientific and technical than one might imagine (Ofri, 2013). Every professional has learnt from and is also influenced by experiences and emotions. Particularly in human service professions, such as medicine, psychology, healthcare and social work, no novice is able to become an expert without building up abundant experience. It also contributes to the trustworthiness of these professionals, providing them with an enormous volume of memory and enabling them to process and analyse scientific data with astonishing speed. In a nutshell, embodied reasoning is the key to practice wisdom. It is a collection of direct experiences, emotions, relations and imaginations. "It is precipitated or crystallized as a result

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of intersubjective intuition, and it is often embodied in actions whose motivations remain in the background of consciousness" (Chu & Tsui, 2008, p. 49).

Practice wisdom is not a particular skill that social workers can decide to use or not use for a specific therapeutic purpose. Scholars such as Klein and Bloom (1995) posit that practice wisdom "serves to translate both empirical and theoretical knowledge and previous practice experience into present and future professional behaviour" (p. 803). However, this understanding of practice wisdom has shifted the discussion to a strongly utilitarian focus and largely omits the "self" of the practitioner. The author argues that practice wisdom, where it manifests itself, is embodied in the social worker's physical and psychological self. Nevertheless, this is not to advocate a subjective and authoritative focus in social work practice. Rather, if we view social work as an art, this author argues that social workers, who possess embodied practice wisdom, are used to exercising assessment, judgement and practical skills with a strongly personal flavour.

## THE HEURISTIC PARADIGM: A BRIEF RECAPITULATION

As a meta-theory of research, the heuristic paradigm begins with the realization that no privileged realities are present. It strongly emphasizes the internal frame of reference, intuition and indwelling of the researcher (Moustakas, 1990). Researchers must accept that it is impossible to include everything in a heuristic inquiry. Biases are common and should not be avoided but mastered. Heuristic researchers are not opposed to experimental or interventionist methods. A common misunderstanding has been that they consider only qualitative approaches. Instead, they accept different types of rigorous tools for data collection and analysis (Tyson, 1992). The research design should not be determined by the research paradigm, but should be decided by the individual researcher according to their particular research question within a specific context (Heineman-Pieper, Tyson & Pieper, 2002). More importantly, the heuristic paradigm "addresses the assumptions entailed in how one generates and appraises knowledge" (Tyson, 1992, p. 549). Through the collection and examination of "narrative descriptions, dialogues, stories, poems, artwork, journals and diaries, autobiographical logs, and other personal documents", a heuristic researcher seeks to explore the "full and complete depictions of the experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 39).

The etymology of heuristic is in the Greek word "heuriskein", meaning to discover or find. The heuristic inquiry begins with the self-searching process of a specific theme by the researcher. The researcher's very intense interest and desire to unravel this intriguing phenomenon leads him or her

to actively engage with the subject through self-inquiry and self-dialogue at an early stage. This comes about through a process of immersion during which the researcher literally lives with the research theme or question intimately in “walking, sleeping, and even dream state” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). For the researcher, everything that he or she encounters in daily life can help inspire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Such a sense of total involvement ignites the “search from the internal frame of reference” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 47) and emphasizes personal knowledge, hunches, intuitive clues and tacit knowing. After that, sufficient time has to be allowed for incubation and illumination to occur naturally. During incubation, the researcher retreats from the research question and waits for further clarifications through the inner working of his or her mind. A new dimension of knowledge may be formed after the awakening breakthrough from tacit knowing to conscious awareness, i.e. illumination.

The heuristic paradigm facilitates a fruitful fusion of practice and research. Heineman-Pieper *et al.* (2002) suggest that the heuristic paradigm fits well with social work research. The author of this paper supports this view and argues that the heuristic inquiry serves as a suitable channel for researchers to move closer to the unexplored enigma of practice wisdom in social work. The word “heuristic” in itself also refers to the act of knowing in spontaneous decision-making (Tyson, 1992). Influenced heavily by Polanyi (1966), the heuristic paradigm embraces the concepts of tacit knowing, intuition and indwelling (Moustakas, 1990). There is a need for social work practitioners to be explicit about their reasoning process in order to justify the presence of “unreliable, personal, idiosyncratic knowledge built up through practice experience” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 222). Chu and Tsui (2008) echo Polkinghorne’s (2004) assertion that social work is a “judgement-based practice” rather than a “technical rational practice” and emphasize the importance of understanding practice wisdom by exploring the embodied reasoning process of practitioners. These assertions are in line with the understanding of practice wisdom by Longhofer and Floersch (2012), which “address how in practice we use our bodies, our personal presence, and our clients in contingent situations” (p. 511).

## **A HEURISTIC INQUIRY OF PRACTICE WISDOM IN SOCIAL WORK**

The heuristic paradigm was introduced to social science by Herbert Simon. It reflects the assertion that social work decisions are not made after a series of careful calculations. Heineman (1981) introduced the heuristic paradigm to social work research. This paradigm allows research to serve as a tool for practitioners and practice educators in order to understand “the complex, changing, and diverse realities that social workers face” (Tyson, 1992, p. 542). The self of the researcher is

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acknowledged throughout a process that incorporates creative self-processes and self-discoveries (Moustakas, 1990). The application of a heuristic to a problem yields a transformation of the problem into an intuitively related problem. As a social worker, one comes to understand the phenomenon with increasing depth, experiencing growing self-awareness and self-knowledge through the practice of heuristic research.

In spite of its significance to human services, empirical research on practice wisdom is exceptionally rare in social work. Social workers are regarded as reflective experts who make professional decisions through heuristic and intuitive actions, rather than following-the-rules behaviour as emphasized in evidence-based practice. Hence, Guo and Tsui (2014) argue that reflective practice is preferable to evidence-based practice because social work interventions are usually uncertain and the process of decision-making in the real world is, in fact, context-dependent. The author of this paper argues that the methodological challenge is one of the major obstacles in looking for soft evidence (Murdach, 2010) of practitioners' wisdom and experience. Heuristic discovery, which emphasizes "the power of revelation in tacit knowing" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 20) will guide us through this journey in the dark, through the six important phases in heuristic research – namely, initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. Key and Kerr (2011) stress the importance of engaging with our unconscious as reflective heuristic researchers and looking carefully into the pros and cons as we engage intensely with the research. A recent study on practitioners' knowledge (Tyson-McCrea & Bulanda, 2010), which focuses primarily on the social workers' subjective experience of their own knowledge and clinical decisions, sheds light on how a heuristic inquiry could help to narrow the gap between theory and real-life practice.

## RESEARCHING PRACTICE WISDOM IN YOUTH WORK SETTING

According to Sercombe (2010), youth work is a professional relationship, in which the primary client is the young person. It includes, but is not limited to, the work of social workers. The key elements of youth work are voluntary involvement, association, informal relationships and educational intention (Cheung, 2015a; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Sercombe, 2010). It is highly contextual (Sapin, 2013) and full of ethical tensions and dilemmas (Banks, 1999, 2000). Both statutory and voluntary organizations work with young people on the basis of their own specific ideas and working strategy methods (Batten & Batten, 1970; Cheung, 2014). The discussion in the field of youth work cannot be isolated from wider society. It is not a thing in itself, but rather a response to the pressures, trends, ideas and attitudes of the outside world. There are

five stages of development in a relationship with young people, namely (1) making contact, (2) testing out, (3) the expression of feeling, (4) the appearance of strong feelings and (5) exploring the potential (Goetschius, Tash, and the Young Women's Christian Association, 1967, p. 317). Jeffs and Smith (2010) suggest that youth workers should have faith in people rather than only being approachable and friendly. As for Sercombe (2010, p. 3), "all the things that youth work claims to do and to be for young people are about the ethics of the situation". Anderson-Nathe (2010, p. 69) further argues that youth workers may share power with clients and enable them to "set the tone for and direct the helping relationship". Indeed, the professionalism of youth work lies in the relationship with clients rather than a set of practices (Sercombe, 2010). For a successful relationship to be established, "the person or character of the worker is of fundamental importance" (Jeffs & Smith, 2010, p. 3). It is the central task of a youth worker to construct and sustain educational and social relationships with young people (Blacker, 2010).

For instance, in the context of Hong Kong, youth work makes up a significant portion of the state-funded social work service (Cheung, 2014, 2016). Social workers are hired to facilitate young people's personal and social development and to provide them with necessary guidance and support through a wide range of services including children and youth centre services, outreaching social work and school social work services. To this end, establishing voluntary relationships with young people is inevitably a recurring theme. In youth work, there is a covenant between workers and clients in working as partners "to heal hurts, to repair damage, to grow into responsibility, and to promote new ways of being" (Sercombe, 2010, p. 11). According to Sapin (2013), youth workers usually have a sense of humour and enjoy work with young people. However, they also take a strong stance on rules and authority and are less likely to collude in unacceptable behaviour. Nevertheless, Sapin (2013) also mentions that youth work is flexible in the sense that different styles of youth workers are available to suit a diversity of young people. Jones and Pritchard (1980) assert that the style of the worker is the central mechanism affecting the quality of social work provided. Referring to Blacker (2010), youth workers need to think about who they are, what qualities they bring to their interactions and how their personality affects their relationships. Youth workers have a responsibility to look at themselves in order to understand why they can relate to young people better than others, since relationships are central to practice.

Engagement, which refers to establishing effective working relationships with clients, plays an important role in the social work relationship. Effective engagement produces a shared platform through which workers and clients can exchange their views and it helps to establish a shared commitment to working on the clients' issues. Engagement is fundamental to working effectively



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in youth work settings. If an effective engagement cannot be established at the initial stage of a working relationship, further assessment and intervention will not be possible. It is generally agreed that social workers need to engage clients well in order to promote a trusting relationship. However, social work engagement has received surprisingly little attention in social work literature. Although working with involuntary clients (Calder, 2008; Rooney, 2009; Trotter, 2006) is not new to social work, this research focuses not only on the skills and techniques that can be used to successfully engage involuntary clients, but more importantly the root of human-to-human connections between workers and service users. Academics such as Smith *et al.* (2012, p. 1462) suggest that:

the reality is that most social work relationships are involuntary; they happen in situations in which the recipient of the service does not freely enter into the contract, but in which they are mandated by law and may resent having to do so.

However, this research does not focus on how social workers can turn a relationship from involuntary to voluntary. Rather, it focuses on how a voluntary and trustful relationship can be cultivated in the first place, no matter whether service users are or are not identified as “needing help” prior to engagement. According to Chenot (1998, p. 307), “the centrality of the relationship in the clinical situation is also an important long-standing value in social work”. Instead of recasting the skills and techniques provided in social work textbooks that help practitioners to “build trust” with clients, this research explores the practice wisdom, or the uncommon sense, of social workers who engage with young people, an aspect of their work which is not and should not be merely instrumental. By understanding intersubjectivity, it refers to how the worker and the client become involved in a process of co-determination within their relationship (Chenot, 1998; Cheung, 2015b).

By adopting the heuristic paradigm, a researcher can lift the lid on the practice wisdom in the social work relationship with young people. This means examining social work practice wisdom through the lens of senior practitioners’ self-reports about their unique experiences, observations, feelings, insights, reflections and tacit knowledge. The youth work setting is an invaluable resource for ensuring the discovery of the tacit, spontaneous and embodied practice wisdom of social workers. Especially when it comes to voluntary contact between social workers and clients, practice wisdom has to be utilized in order for a successful relationship to be established. Youth workers seek to maximize the opportunities for engaging with clients, drawing from years of experience in the field and their embodied abilities to evaluate their intersubjective connections with young people. Despite their expertise and practice wisdom, the working scenarios of the youth work setting

remain highly uncertain. This, in turn, provides the researcher with an excellent environment in which to explore how senior practitioners are able to cope with new challenges through their practice wisdom.

## **THE INTERPLAY OF BIAS AND VALIDITY IN HEURISTIC RESEARCH**

Practitioner bias is a major criticism of practice wisdom. In social work research it is suggested that practitioners' lay habits of thought serve as an obstacle, not only to "professional" decision-making, but also to the implementation of evidence-based practice (Rosen, 2003). However, unlike other research paradigms, such as logical empiricism, which will do whatever it takes to eliminate potential biases, the heuristic paradigm seeks to offer social workers some powerful and effective conceptual tools with which "to reduce and manage bias, and to yield reliable, robust, and significant scientific knowledge" (Heineman-Pieper *et al.*, 2002, p. 16). Biases (which should be differentiated from unjust and destructive prejudice) are welcomed in this paradigm, and acknowledged as one of the core components in heuristic research. Professional intuition should not be viewed as a source of error. The heuristic paradigm teaches researchers how to recognize and manage biases, rather than to overlook and deny them. This helps to protect social work research from losing its relevance to practitioners' concerns and real-world problems (Heineman-Pieper *et al.*, 2002). For Key and Kerr (2011), testing researchers' intuitive interpretations against each other, i.e. between the researchers and co-researchers, serves as one of the recommended ways in which to safeguard validity during the course of intersubjective exploration, provided that validity procedures are implemented, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, intersubjective reflection and peer supervision.

## **CONCLUSION**

Practice wisdom in social work refers to a distinct sensibility that is invisible and has hardly been articulated, i.e. it is tacit in nature. However, practice wisdom manifests itself in a variety of ways. From assessments and judgement to skills, social workers who possess practice wisdom relate the "use of self" to practise intuitively, spontaneously and reflectively. With practice wisdom, social workers can discern, respond and reflect simultaneously. They can develop on-the-spot mini-hypotheses and make ethical decisions without pre-existing solutions in mind. The linking up of self to the professional decision-making process accounts for the manifestation of practice wisdom. England (1986) points out that the similarity between art and social work lies in works of

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coherence and complexity. Social work has to “be aspiring to the infinite complexity of experience, and trying to render this complexity coherent” (England, 1986, p. 105). Such an intuitive process requires a great deal from the personal qualities of the artist since selection and synthesis are a matter of individual consciousness.

Grounded on the heuristic paradigm in social work research, this paper has addressed the importance of looking for the practice wisdom of practitioners by acknowledging their role as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1990, 1994) rather than as research subjects only. Key and Kerr (2011) have integrated four vital and interconnected elements in applying a heuristic method, namely intersubjective enquiry between researchers, ecological contextualization, social activism and engagement with the unconscious. Research subjects are considered as co-researchers in heuristic research (Tyson, 1995). It is the intersubjective process between research and the co-researchers that provides support and generates creative tension (Key & Kerr, 2011). The importance of the relationship between a researcher and their co-researcher, as defined in the heuristic paradigm, is fully acknowledged. It is also treated as a heuristic choice about who to choose, what data to gather and how the data should be analysed and interpreted. Heuristic researchers reject the process of formulating research problems through operationalization. Instead, problem formulation should be a recurring theme in the research process (Tyson, 1992). Researchers go back and forth repeatedly to verify the explication of the phenomenon as well as the depictions of the experience (Moustakas, 1990, 1994).

Research procedures with a heuristic direction are dialectical. Open questions are preferred. The text gathered from detailed descriptions, direct quotations and case documentation should be interrogated from as many different perspectives as possible. The researcher obtains qualitative accounts that are at the heart of a person's experience – depictions of situations, events, conversations, relationships, feelings, thoughts, values and beliefs (Moustakas, 1990). Yet, the heuristic journey can also be a painful experience for enthusiastic researchers. Key and Kerr (2011) warn that it is inevitable that the researcher will become emotionally intimate with the research project. Such an intense engagement with the research question serves as a natural part of the process and is considered as an indicator of moving closer to an answer. Researchers may also experience a sense of loss if they fail to complete the research or have to withdraw from the engagement. Therefore, heuristic researchers need to strive for a good balance and avoid becoming a spent force, taking periods of relaxation from the research question and being willing to embrace the unknown.

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