

## Practitioner Evaluation

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### Introduction

Practitioner evaluation: the idea that practitioners themselves undertake a systematic study of their own practice has been encouraged for a long time as an applied social work and health practice research strategy. It is viewed as an opportunity for practitioners to take advantage of the availability of information of data within their organisations; to reflect on the effectiveness of their work with clients without the need for a major research project; it is cost effective research; and it helps professionals bridge the gaps between research, practice and theory. In this piece I intend to outline what practitioner evaluation is, some opportunities and constraints of undertaking evaluative work, and consider some applications to social work practice; making a case throughout of the importance of practitioner evaluation as an ongoing and integrated activity into the daily lives of practitioners. Practitioners, incidentally, are not assumed to be only social workers: potentially a variety of statutory, voluntary and private welfare or care related staff may undertake practitioner evaluation.

The purpose of practitioner evaluation is for practitioners to reflect critically on the impact and effectiveness of their professional practice (Everitt *et al*, 1992). A key question that practitioners often ask themselves but seldom know how to answer is: "*how do I know I am doing or have done an effective piece of work?*" They have a choice to allow outside researchers to answer that question for them; they can answer the question in collaboration with researchers, or they can choose to answer the question themselves by devising their own small-scale evaluative study. Practitioner evaluation can be undertaken quantitatively as in the case of single case designs or qualitatively, for example, through in-depth case analysis, interviews or diaries.

The feedback from practitioner evaluation should lead the practitioner to: "*reflect upon [his or her] practice on a more informed basis; pose questions about [his or her] effort, effectiveness and efficiency; provide encouragement for what [he or she] is doing well or well enough; and start to indicate which skills and techniques [he or she] should use and develop*" (Leith, 1984: 27). I believe that practitioners from all disciplines should evaluate their work and the programmes of intervention that they run, often as a contrast to, or alongside, larger pieces of research undertaken by outside researchers. Evaluation, not just monitoring, ought to be integrated into the everyday activities of social work practitioners; most practitioners do have the repertoire of skills required (Bernstein & Epstein, 1994) and most would like to gain evidence of doing a good job.

Evaluation itself is a term that attracts a variety of definitions and is often confused with or defined equivalently to research, and to a certain degree the two are not easily separated. The UK Inspectorate of Probation (1998), in a leading report '*Strategies for Effective Offender Supervision*', refers to evaluation as a process of finding some way of measuring and learning about whether the programme is achieving what it sets out to achieve. Vennard (1997) uses the term 'evaluative research' to describe a process of "*assessing or 'taking stock' in a systematic fashion of policies, projects and initiatives in order to keep track of their progress and assess how far the aims and objectives have been achieved*" (p. 20). Hence practitioner evaluation is often about asking the questions:

- What changes are achieved through the interventions that I use?
- Which components of an intervention achieve the most changes?
- What are the short-term or long-term benefits and limitations of my interventions?
- What explanations can I offer to explain the results I observed at the end of the programme? And so on.

### Opportunities

McIvor (1995) suggests three reasons for practitioner evaluation. Firstly, the fact that if practitioners do not evaluate their work in-house then no-one else will. There is simply too much happening for either agency based research staff, or outside researchers to do the work. Secondly, practitioners are "*often better placed than external evaluators to design and conduct evaluative studies that maximise their usefulness and minimize their intrusiveness into day-to-day practice*" (McIvor, 1995, p. 210). Thirdly, it is vital for practitioners and managers to come to regard evaluation as an integral component of their work in order to improve practice and to influence service provision. Evaluation can also provide valuable evidence about particular components of any given programme and whether some are working better than others

which can then be fed back to staff. There is also a consideration of accreditation of treatment, or intervention programmes, in the future and that evaluation will be part and parcel of this process.

Fuller and Petch (1995) add to this list: they suggest that evaluation allows accountability by professionals, for example, to their peers, their clients, their managers and to the wider profession; and that evaluation will help practitioners hone or further develop the skills to critique other people's research. The ability to critique could prove extremely important in analysis of new initiatives based on a narrow research base, for example, the 'What Works' research into criminal behaviour treatments has largely been accepted with little resistance by probation services throughout the world, including New Zealand's Community Probation Service; yet the evidence upon which the 'What Works' movement is based does have some serious gaps; for example, the place of culture and effectiveness. As Thomas (1984) noted: if social workers (or other practitioners) do not become active and critical consumers of research then many positive lessons from research will be lost and certain solutions from research (which may or may not be good) will be imposed upon them.

### **Methodological Issues**

A big issue for practitioners and agencies is the fact that evaluation is usually undertaken with the practitioners own caseload: is this ethical and will the practitioner's 'helping' practice get confused with their evaluation activities? These dilemmas are not easily resolved. Practitioner evaluation is different from reflective practice undertaken as part of the supervision process between line manager and practitioner, as it usually entails writing up and sharing of results (albeit in an anonymous form) with others beyond the confines of supervision or agency boundaries. It is therefore likely that a separate research ethics research application will need to be made to the agency ethics committee (if available or other national body), to obtain permission to interview clients for specific evaluative purposes. Practitioners will need to ensure that clients are fully informed of a different process than the clinical or helping one, which the practitioner usually undertakes with them. Clients will need to agree to participate, whereas they may have had little choice regarding the helping relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Where practitioners do undertake an evaluation of their own practice they will need to be aware of the bias that can occur: clients may want to give a favourable response, so as not to disappoint the social worker, or to avoid loss of services, if the practitioner is deemed to be ineffective (Padgett, 1998). Another aspect or bias that practitioners will need to take account of when evaluating their own practice is their own closeness to the field (they are insiders, they speak same language, they know the routines), which is both an advantage and disadvantage (Fuller & Petch, 1995). They therefore need to find ways of developing a new, slightly distant and more curious role; as if they were meeting their everyday practice situations for the first time – nothing should be taken for granted; rather it should be reflected upon and deconstructed for meaning and analysis.

### **Organisational culture and evaluation**

A significant dilemma to consider when trying to increase the amount of practitioner evaluation undertaken in agencies, is the question of systematic, structural and cultural support (or lack of it) given by the agency or organisation. Whilst space precludes a detailed discussion it is my concern that little value is placed upon practitioner evaluation in social work, save by a few dedicated managers and reflective practitioners (there is plenty of focus on agency evaluation and monitoring but very little on individual practice). My own experiences have been of practitioners being reluctant, or too busy, to engage in evaluation and unsure about relevance of research findings to their immediate context (Gibbs, 1999). Some initiatives, like the 'What Works' programme of research and training (Home Office, 1999), are trying to address the climate of reluctance; however this is being done in a coercive, universalist and non-participatory manner and is unlikely to solve the traditional gap between research and practice (Raynor, 1984). It seems that neither practitioner evaluation nor the results of research have a definite or welcome place in the cultures of most agencies; many small non-profit organisations cannot afford to undertake the work; many large bureaucracies spend large amounts of money undertaking evaluation but then rarely implement the findings.

There needs to be a commitment to evaluate from both managers and practitioners within social work. If practitioners are willing to evaluate their work then they need to be fully supported and given the time to do so by their managers. As Harland (1996, p. 212) says: *"The nature of support provided to line*

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes ethics permission is not obtained or required where evaluation of an intervention or programme with a **group** of clients occurs; often because it has already been made clear to clients at the outset that the programme and their performance will be monitored and evaluated.

*staff to maximise their commitment to a new program is rarely addressed*". This certainly applies to evaluation. Managers need to encourage staff to spend time together looking at the design and evaluation of their interventions. The development and enhancement of practitioner competence or skills in the area of evaluation is one outcome from encouraging practitioner evaluation. Practitioners also gain from evaluation by being able to see for themselves whether they need to make changes to aspects of their interventions and why. Evaluation will offer practitioners an extra confidence to make those changes.

Harland notes that: "*Failure of a program to achieve its objectives may have little or nothing to do with the program's design but may instead be due to inadequate implementation*" (Harland, 1996, p. 184). It is not just a case of practitioner enthusiasm which promotes adequate evaluation but also agency systems must complement practitioner capability. The agency as a whole needs to take responsibility for administering forms, collecting data and reviewing findings but also to clearly identify specific and strategic personnel who are responsible for each of these areas, and to ensure that the implementation process occurs. The agency will need many champions and motivators, not just one lone enthusiast of evaluation. When one person moves on another person must fill their place, which is why evaluation might be best undertaken by a team of practitioners.

Some final questions for readers will help the ongoing debate about agency culture and valuing of practitioner evaluation: how can practitioners be assisted to use (not just be aware of) the results of evaluation? What happened to long service or study leave to help staff develop their research interests? How might staff and researchers be encouraged to work collaboratively with such limited time and resources available for evaluation? Finally, how can the organisation promote a culture of practitioner evaluation in a non-threatening and career enhancing way?

### **Some Applications**

Whilst I am not able to give detail of specific practitioner evaluations in this short piece I wish to provide a few illustrations of the variety of practitioner evaluation that can be undertaken:

- **Case studies** – these can be evaluated quantitatively: for example; by conducting an experiment to measure the frequency of specific behaviours before, during and after treatment or intervention. The onus is on the practitioner as scientist – setting up an explicit, systematic and measurement oriented evaluation (Hayles & Kazi, 1998). On the other hand, qualitative case studies are more likely to involve in-depth interviews, analysis of case notes and the use of diary-based material, rather than charts of frequencies. The practitioner evaluator will often describe, in detail, the case history of a client; the objectives set for change; the methods utilised to help clients achieve change and the changes occurring, whether anticipated or unanticipated. The practitioner will also reflect on the skills, methods, styles, knowledge and values they bring to the case and come to an assessment about their overall effectiveness.
- **Programme evaluation** – many general evaluations of programmes concentrate on outcomes only (achievements; attendance; successful or unsuccessful completions; changes in behaviour or attitudes during the programme); but process evaluation is just as important. Therefore practitioner evaluations of programmes might do well to address: the consistency of delivery of services by different workers; how clients perceive the benefits and limitations of the programme; how agency systems and cultures impact the programme and what kind of questions need to be asked to ascertain improvements in the behaviour and circumstances of clients. When undertaking programme evaluation practitioners will often want to collaborate with colleagues, service users and sometimes outside researchers. In a programme evaluation that I undertook with probation practitioners in the UK in 1998, the practitioners decided on the aims of the evaluation, the type of questions to ask, the means of collecting the information and how they would use the results gathered. My role as outside researcher was to provide the initial ideas about evaluation; assist with questionnaire development and analysis of data; and provide general encouragement for practitioners as they administered and piloted new questionnaires.
- **Consumer studies** – a critical aspect of practitioner evaluation will be some form of feedback from clients. Practitioners may wish to interview their own clients but they might also get a colleague to do so; they may wish to get the client to complete a short survey or checklist; or they may do a study of

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<sup>2</sup> Readers may wish to send in their own accounts of attempting practitioner evaluations, to help illustrate, or continue further discussion about, some of the ideas discussed here.

the views of all of their clients at once: by facilitating some focus groups and asking questions about their practice in general. The consumer feedback is a potentially daunting part of practitioner evaluation but is very important; after all, the clients, whether by choice or by compulsion, are on the receiving end of practice (sometimes experimental and innovative) – don't they have a right to tell practitioners if they are providing a satisfactory (or unsatisfactory service)?

- **Practitioner assessments and interventions** – Practitioners can evaluate their assessment and intervention practice through many means: like having others observe their practice; videoing or tape recording sessions; filling in evaluation forms at the end of each meeting and so on. Broad and Fletcher (1993) and Fook (1996) provide additional reading on a range of techniques adopted, and accounts of the experiences of practitioners, in undertaking practitioner research. Practitioners will always come up with new ways of evaluating what they do and it is important that they look at all areas of their practice: agency role; relationships with clients; interventions tried; interventions avoided (and why); and outcomes achieved. Without evaluation how can practitioners confidently assert that they KNOW they are doing a good job?

### Conclusion

Evaluation is too often tacked on at the end of a programme or when someone says "*by the way don't you think we ought to see whether what we are doing makes any difference, or whether it is achieving what we set out to achieve?*" Practitioner evaluation as an integrated component of social work will ensure that practice becomes sharper and more able to meet client need or achieve change; it will also open up areas of decision-making and practice not often explored by practitioners. The benefits of evaluation outweigh its limitations: evaluation can be creative and fun to do, as well as demanding but ultimately it is about improving practice and maintaining credibility with self, clients and other key stakeholders.

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