

**THE ROLE OF PRACTICE WISDOM IN TRANSCENDING THE PRACTICE- THEORY
DIVIDE AS APPLICABLE IN A POSTCOLONIAL ERA**

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INTRODUCTION

- The effects of colonisation and, subsequently, apartheid remain embedded in the systems and structures, long after their ‘abolishing’ at administrative level.
- Situation has been characterised by clashes of culture, violent territorial disputes, dispossession and repression, and other racial and political tensions
- Deconstructive process is a tiresome process, hence every effort, how insignificant it may appear, is worth undertaking
- One cannot overestimate the close relationship between social work practice and society
- Tempted to regard practice as a microcosm of society-
- Practice wisdom in social work resembles what general wisdom is in society.
- The survival of the profession, just like any society, mainly, relies on its ability to preserve and inculcate its knowledge base across generations- the profession’s identity, evolution and knowledge development

- Knowledge, knowing and know how are nowadays considered as the most important resources and factors of production in an information society (Drucker, 1993)
- The multi-faceted nature of knowledge is evident in Beckett's (2006) assertion- empirical knowledge, policies and procedures, theories (factual) & experiences, intuition and so on
- Explicit, exact and observable knowledge represents only a small part of the whole character of knowledge and know how. A great majority of the whole knowledge capital is hidden in people' s experiences, knowing and skills (Puusa & Eerikäinen, 2007)

PURPOSE

The objectives of this paper are:

- Firstly, the author argues that social work is not a solely evidence-based activity, but that intuition plays a special role in professional judgement and decision –making
- Key in this argument is the notion that the professional intuition of social workers is context-specific and that practice wisdom is cultivated through intersubjective encounters with clients.
- Secondly, on the study of practice wisdom, there is a prevailing need for opening up debate and development.
- Thirdly, a heuristic paradigm that embraces the concepts of tacit knowing and intuition is recommended as a suitable channel through which to research the unexplored enigma of practice wisdom in social work.

BRIEF ON LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussing practice wisdom, including practice-based knowledge, tacit knowledge and process knowledge, is not a new agenda in the field of social work

(Gray & Schubert, 2013).

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

(Cheung, 2016)

EBP in social work rests on four cornerstones: (1) research and theory; (2) practice wisdom, or what we and other professionals have which also includes professional values; (3) the person of the practitioner, or our personal assumptions, values, biases, and world views; and (4) what clients bring to practice situations

(Gilgun, 2005)

“we can’t trust it [intuition], but we can’t live without it”

(Klein, 2004)

WHAT PRACTICE WISDOM IS NOT

- PW - not a common sense with no basis
- PW - is not a polar opposite of evidence- based approach
- PW - does not stand in direct contrast to theories or application thereof
- PW – may be less valued, but it is never a less legitimate source of knowledge
- PW – not about searching for correct solutions to problems



WHAT PW IS ABOUT

- Barker (1999:370) describes PW as the accumulation of information, assumptions, ideologies, and judgments that are practically useful in fulfilling the expectations of the practice
- Practice wisdom is a judgement- based practice as opposed to rational technical practice capable of bringing back the value of human element in knowledge development and practice.
- Practice wisdom - subjective experience of doing social work every day, mostly unconsciously and intuitively.
- Contemporary practice situation reflects aggravating the situation because it is detached from the people's experiences as a result there is a need to work on coming up with the methods that are able to deal with the social thoughts, behavioural patterns, trends and practices that emerge from practice.
- In the main, practice wisdom provides practitioners with the opportunity to reflect on culturally- grounded professional practice and enabling them to connect and respond to the unique needs of client systems
- It is from similar basis that alongside the decolonisation process, there is a need to reflect on practice, whether the practitioner provides a primary role, secondary role or operate within a multi-disciplinary settings.
- In simple terms, practice wisdom refers to that which practitioners learn through the subjective experiences, which could be enacted through patterns of behaviour that are evident in every day practice.

THE RELEVANCE OF PRACTICE WISDOM IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

- This paper acknowledges the practice wisdom as a strategy for transcending the ‘theory – practice divide’, which could be viewed as key in transforming the educational and practice landscape
- This paper argues that practice wisdom serves as an intermediate method that enables the incumbents to effect theory- based interventions on situations emerging from practice
- Practical, or practice, wisdom that is peculiar to our profession develops through the experience of doing our craft in the context of our professional relationships and the social circumstances in which it conceptualised
- This paper argues that practice wisdom serves as an intermediate method that enables the incumbents to effect theory- based interventions on situations emerging from practice
- Specific practice contexts influence actions and interpretations of the roleplayers

METHODOLOGY

- ‘The relevance of practice wisdom in social work practice’ emerged one of the key themes that emerged from an inquiry explained within a constructive paradigm and embedded in the exploratory descriptive design
- Twelve (n=12) supervisors participated in this process and semi- structured interviews were used a tool thereof.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

1. TRANSITION THEORY

- The transition theory was created because a “need existed to develop a framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and aid them in connecting to the help they needed to cope with the ‘ordinary and extraordinary process of living’ (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, Renn, 2010).
- According to Mordock in Botha (2000:5- 6) transition is explained using the three phased process, namely withdrawing from the previous role, identifying with the new role & complete transition to the new role.
- Schlossberg identifies four major sets of factors that influence a person’s ability to cope with a transition: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies
- In line with acknowledging the interactional nature of the phenomenon transition is more of a process than event.

2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

- Experiential learning refers to ‘making meaning from direct experience’ (Mughal, 2011). Individuals are said to be gaining and constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment as determined through perceived experiences
- ELT serves to explain how the participants construct meanings from their collective experiences, which emerge from experiencing of concrete or tangible (apprehension) and symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization (comprehension)

VALUE-BASED ACTIVITY

- Finding confirms that, in reality the practitioners view that several values are still relevant in practice since the profession deals with human beings. Value – being viewed as the key aspect in human engagement and they intergrate both personal and professional elements. .
- (Lymberry & Postle, 2007- Social work is an applied but value-laden activity) - Expert (scientific – technical knowledge is coming under mounting public criticism, questionining its alleged value neutrality
- Rokeach, Rounds and Jim (2013: 421) also make a distinction between instrumental and terminal values.
 - ✓ Instrumental level: related to the means and refer to beliefs about desirable modes of conduct.
 - ✓ Terminal level: implying the end result of the values and refers to beliefs about a desirable state of existence.

SELF-AWARENESS

- Role clarity could relate with understanding of authority and the limitations for exercising such authority
- Davis (2010) argues that the supervisor needs to develop awareness and understanding of authority and own personal control, in the same manner that the supervisee is expected to develop.
- Leung (2012: 151) emphasises the extent which the use of authority affects the outcome of their services

RELATIONSHIP

Profession is about human beings interacting at human level-
Susceptible to human challenges & vulnerabilities

- Capacity to think and to feel
- Role ambiguity and role confusion
- Anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Enhancing adaptation & resilience in adversarial conditions
- Restoration of emotional equilibrium

TURBULANCE NATURE OF SOCIAL WORK CONTEXT

- Parson (2002) and Gray, Midgley and Webb (2012) describe the social work contexts as the turbulent and dynamic settings, characterized by diversity, uncertainty, fragmentation, ambiguity and change
- Social work practice is by its nature practiced within the context of uncertainty. From both assertions, one could conclude that, even the best evidence- based intervention cannot guarantee the specific kind of outcome

CONCLUSIONS

- The paper concludes that viewing of practice wisdom and evidence based approach in a polarised manner impact negatively on the development of discipline's knowledge base.
- There is a need for embracing practice wisdom as a method of promoting human connection among practitioners and clients at local level, hence promoting the opportunity to learn from the issues emerging from practice.
- This paper concludes with a reminder that some professions, particularly the caring professions are built on the human elements like ethics, values and relationships, to name a few. It is also crucial to reiterate the insight that practice is not about coming with the right or wrong answers, but that in interacting with the client system, practitioners have to make decisions without any clear-cut guidance, with these aspects featuring in the process.