

Recent conceptualization of EVIDENCE in social work practice.

Ph.d. course

Aalborg University, Denmark 16-18 November 2011.

A new trend in the governance of Social Work focuses on systems for measuring and documenting effects of different forms of interventions. One of the instruments in this field that has a considerable support among politicians is the systematic reviews produced by institutions like Cochrane and Campbell. But what are the practical circumstances for the production of these reviews, what are the methodologies and scientific philosophy behind, and does the ambition of this new type of governance respect the specific elements that characterize social work practice? In the recent international discussions of these questions you will find both new and old well known themes in the history of science and applied social research.

The course will introduce the students to the international discussions of these serious questions and their historical roots making it possible for the students to choose their own focus with respect to all other dimensions that characterize this complicated mix of scientific as well as political issues.

Part 1: Institutional perspectives. Wednesday afternoon.

From an institutional perspective, evidence based on systematic reviews is a question of how to organize, qualify and secure the validity and reliability of institutional procedures in review producing institutions such as The Cochrane Institute and The Campbell Institute. These institutions are integrated in complicated relations to political decision making in national states and they are required to get their conclusions accepted by practitioners and researchers. Furthermore these institutions are private organizations, whose resources are dependent on their audience, their costumers and the reputation they gain among politicians, practitioners and researchers. As such, the evidence producing institutions can be seen as part of a social movement involving different actors in the evolvment of new institutional structures.

Keynote speakers: Olaf Rieper – who has contributed to the research by investigating these procedures and the institutional complex of relations between political decision making, research activities and systematic reviews. Tommy Lundström has contributed to the discussion by studying the process and actors involved in the evidence debate in Sweden.

Part 2: Applied social science perspectives. Thursday before noon.

From an applied social science perspective, the concept of evidence based practical and political decisions are not a new idea or ambition for social research. From Weber forth, social science has often engaged the difficult task of qualifying political decisions and practical social innovations. In the postwar period social science participated in the harsh work of building up and consolidating the modern welfare states. Social engineering, sociotechnics, evaluation research and action research became concepts of both hope and disappointment. Is the evidence movement just repeating ambitions and experiences which has been discussed long ago, or are we facing a new social technology never seen before?

Keynote speakers: KjeldHøgsbro – who has studied the long tracks from Weber through contributions from Adorno, Lazarsfeldog Reitz, Weis, Camhis, Podgorecki, Campbell, Guba and Lincoln to Pawson and looked at similarities and differences in the discussions as well as the institutional and governmental context. Juha Koivisto, who has addressed the ontological questions behind EBP with reference to basic questions in social science.

Part 3: Methodological and scientific perspectives. Thursday afternoon.

From a methodological perspective the emphasis on RCT (randomized controlled trials) might be the most crucial aspect of the way systematic reviews are being produced in review producing institutions. When addressing this hierarchy in the understanding of how to gain reliable and valid knowledge of the efficiency of practice, some researchers have posed the question whether this was just a repetition of some old debates between positivistic positions and more pluralistic positions. Do qualitative and hermeneutic methods have a chance in the political audience if the evidence movement conquers the agenda? Is it only a question of purpose, aims and means which sometimes points at RCT and sometimes points at qualitative case studies? Or is it a question of antagonistic discourses of the relation between science, method and reality that will never find a solution?

Keynote speaker: Tore Jacob Ekeland - one of the most prominent researchers who has tried to find out what was the roots and paradigmatic gaps in the discussions about RCT as the golden standards of systematic reviews.

Part 4: Practical and clinical social work perspectives. Friday before noon.

From a practical perspective the concept of evidence based practice is far from being an unambiguous manual for social work practice. The concept of evidence based practice rises some deeper questions of the relations between practice and research, the relation between knowledge of populations and knowledge of individuality and context. Some might even foresee that the emphasis on systematic reviews might strangle any innovative development of social work and abandon the dialogue between professionals and users as basis for social intervention. But does this exaggerate the problems and is it possible to find middle ways?

Keynote speaker: Edgar Martinsen who has been one of the most experienced researchers when it comes to invention, implementation and evaluation of practical social work models.

Assessment

Students are expected to forward a brief synopsis (max. one page) to the theme that interests them the most. In each part of the course, the presentation on behalf of the experienced researcher will be followed by critical comments and questions from the students who have addressed the announced theme of this part of the course. Questions, comments and critique have to refer to the questions and core literature of each part of the course. Literature will be announced in advance to students who are accepted as participants.

Paper deadline for students accepted to the seminar: October 17th 2011.

Four ECTS are given to students for participating and actively contributing to the discussion with a synopsis and an oral presentation addressing a theme related to one of the four parts of the course.

Further information

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