

Revisiting the Knowledge Base of Social Work: A Framework for Practice

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Summary

The starting point for this paper is the view that social work practice is a highly skilled activity and one that calls for an extensive knowledge base and considerable intellectual abilities. However, considerable confusion remains about what constitutes the *knowledge base of social work* and how this can be applied to the dilemmas regularly encountered in direct work. This article begins with an account of key writing on the subject of knowledge and, drawing on these works, it describes a framework that includes three interweaving features: (i) theoretical knowledge (or theory); (ii) factual knowledge (including research); and (iii) practice/practical/personal knowledge. A particular feature of this paper is that it locates the knowledge that service users and carers bring to the encounter within the same framework as the knowledge demonstrated by social workers, other professionals and involved individuals. Since most of the published works on the subject of social work knowledge tend to be written by academics, a central aim of this paper is to make this subject accessible to social work practitioners, students, service users and carers in order to encourage their contribution to the debate on what constitutes the knowledge base of social work.

Keywords: knowledge, theory, perspectives, values, skills, interventions

Introduction

Social work, it is argued, has difficulty articulating and demarcating an exclusive knowledge base (Eraut, 1994, p. 3; Taylor and White, 2006) and, perhaps for this reason, what constitutes knowledge within social work continues to be a difficult subject. This paper offers a contribution to that exploration and begins with a general account of how *knowledge* and *theory* have been defined and how these notions relate to the difficulties encountered in contemporary social work practice. It then describes a knowledge framework that is conceptualized in terms of three interweaving and overlapping features: (i) theoretical knowledge or theories; (ii) factual knowledge (including research); and (iii) practice/practical/personal knowledge.

This framework acknowledges the knowledge that all parties bring to the encounter, including practitioners, other professionals and involved individuals. In particular, it reframes and elevates the knowledge that service users and carers bring by including their knowledge within the same framework as the knowledge demonstrated by professionals, thereby ensuring that all forms of knowledge are considered relevant and used in ways that can guide understanding and action. The task of reframing of service users' and carers' knowledge in this way calls for careful consideration. One starting point would be to elicit the views of service user and carer organizations who are already involved in the selection process for candidates applying to social work courses and other areas of programme design and delivery. To involve service users and carers who are located outside these organizations is a more difficult task but one that needs to be considered if we are to build our work on the different type of knowledge that all parties possess.

Theory and knowledge

Knowledge and *theory* are sometimes used interchangeably but they are rarely defined in social work texts and in the guidance documents that regulate social work education in the UK. This often leads to confusion about how these two terms relate and their relevance to contemporary social work practice. In order to avoid adding further confusion, the following definitions inform this paper. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines knowledge as 'facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical and practical understanding of a subject' (Pearsall and Hanks, 2003, p. 967) and theory as 'a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something' (Pearsall and Hanks, 2003, p. 1829). The notion of 'theory as explanation' places theories and theorizing at one end of a spectrum as something accessible—something that we all do. This is sometimes referred to as *bottom-up* explanations, *lay* theorizing (Shaw, 2005), *lay wisdom* (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003) and *common-sense* notions (England, 1986, p. 33). At the other end of the spectrum lie *top-down* approaches, which are more likely to draw on theories that have been classified in terms of grand or middle-range theories. *Grand theories* (Mills, 1959) draw

on abstract conceptualizations, such as scientific theories and research that purport to explain more or less everything in society, such as Marxism, feminism and religious ideologies, whereas lesser claims are made under the heading *middle-range* theories (Merton, 1963), which attempt to explain only a limited range of phenomena or incidents, such as the impact of oppression and social inequalities.

These definitions show a clear link between the desire to *explain* (theory) and the desire to *understand* (knowledge) what is happening and why. It suggests that acquiring knowledge is a much more in-depth undertaking than theorizing because knowledge involves gathering, analysing and synthesizing different theories (explanations) in order to arrive at some kind of tentative understanding, hypothesis or judgement. However, in some contexts, the emphasis on understanding—or *knowing about something*—can mean that the ability to put that knowledge into action—*knowing how*—can easily be ignored as a key area of knowledge and overshadowed by more scientific and abstract forms. Yet in social work, knowledge needs to incorporate ‘both practical and theoretical knowledge’ (Polanyi, 1967, p. 7)—*knowing about* and *knowing how*. This emphasizes the importance of ‘a theory of action’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 29).

In everyday contexts, we seek and use knowledge in order to understand ourselves, others and the world around us. In professional circles, *understanding others* usually takes precedence but to do this well involves a degree of self-knowledge and an understanding of how we relate and come across to others (Trevithick, 2003). A central aspect of this quest or exploration is the search for truth—the desire to know what constitutes reality. What constitutes ‘the shaping of reality through truth’ (Popper, 1994, p. 7) gives rise to an important dilemma, namely the difference between *subjective* and *objective* interpretations. Subjective knowledge refers to what we have come to ‘know’ as individuals, often through experience, but what may be *true* or *real* for me may not be the case for others. Similarly, what we *believe* may or may not be true or valid—that is, it does not constitute objective knowledge, which ‘refers to points of view that have survived critical tests of evaluation’ (Gibbs and Gambrill, 1996, p. 15). However, this testing is almost always shaped by subjective knowledge and ideological assumptions that prevail at the time. These complexities indicate important differences—that how people interpret their lives, the world they inhabit and their interaction with others, can vary greatly—and lead to fundamental differences in the way that people perceive events, and the understanding and meaning they give to experiences. These issues can seem to be far removed from contemporary social work, yet what constitutes truth or reality lies at the heart of the assessment process, and other aspects of our work. It involves attempting to understand the ‘multiple identities’ that people have—how experiences are perceived, understood and communicated verbally and non-verbally, and how these factors impact on behaviour and life situations, both positive and negative. To a lesser and greater degree, this understanding will always be incomplete and uneven because, in the realm of human experience, life is unpredictable and uncertainty inevitable (Marris, 1996; Parton, 2000; Taylor and White, 2006).

Types of knowledge in social work

In an attempt to classify the knowledge used in social care, of which social work is only one part, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) commissioned a knowledge review, entitled *Types and Quality of Knowledge in Social Care* (Pawson *et al.*, 2003). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this review ‘revealed no existing schema that covered the entire range of social care knowledge’ (Pawson *et al.*, 2003, p. 17). Nevertheless, different authors have sought to find ways to classify the knowledge base of social work and to place an emphasis on certain features over others. This is a dense jungle of concepts, often deploying rather sterile terms to describe these different features. Nevertheless, it is essential to explore these classifications and differences in emphasis if we are to understand how the knowledge base of social work has been conceptualized.

Looking first at those authors who emphasize the importance of a more scientific, technical–rational and expert-oriented approach to knowledge, this takes the view that a ‘scientifically accepted criteria must permeate the curriculum and be presented as a standard for practice’ (Rosen, 1994, p. 574). This more rational orientation to knowledge rests ‘on the assumption that systematically produced, “scientific”, generalized and generalizable (propositional) knowledge provides the most solid foundations for practice’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 4). This links to a family of concepts that can be described in a number of ways—as *propositional knowledge* (Eraut, 1994, p. 15; Taylor, 2006), *formal* or *product knowledge* (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003), *expert* or *specialist knowledge* (Fook, 2002, p. 37), or *technical knowledge* (Healy, 2000, p. 79). This more formal and formalized type of knowledge can be found in the subjects taught in schools and universities, particularly science subjects in which *remembering* or *learning by rote* can be considered more important than *comprehending* the points being conveyed. The unquestioned adherence to certain areas of knowledge can lead to *rules* being created about situations or an aspect of human behaviour. The way that evidence-based practice (EBP) is promoted can be an example of the application of rules, namely ‘if research findings indicate approach B is the most effective with problem A, and problem A is the one confronted by the practitioner, then approach B should be adopted’ (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000, p. 466–7). An example of the application of rule-based approaches to practice can be found in the government’s behaviour change strategy (Halpern and Bates, 2004), in which we see the promotion of behaviour change programmes, such as manuals on ‘anger management’ or ‘managing difficult behaviour’ groups. Whilst these programmes can be effective, as in the case of smoking cessation programmes, they often focus on a single issue or problem. For social work, the multiplicity of tasks and the complex problems that are regularly presented mean that this more ‘scientific’ and evidence-based stance can be extremely difficult to apply because it tends to underplay the multi-faceted nature of the problems regularly encountered and the ‘complex processes involved in social work interventions’ (Webb, 2001, p. 72). These complexities call for practitioners and service users to use different types of knowledge in

order to acquire an in-depth understanding of what is happening, and why—and how best to address these concerns.

A different emphasis to more abstract, ‘scientific’ and legitimated areas of knowledge are those that focus on knowledge gained through action and experience—on the way that *knowing about a subject* is translated into *knowing how*. This area of knowledge is also described in a number of ways—as *process knowledge* (Sheppard *et al.*, 2001), *professional knowledge* (Eraut, 1994, p. 16) and *action knowledge* (Osmond, 2005). The concept of *process knowledge* ‘focuses on the processes by which judgments are made’ (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003, p. 157)—processes which stress that knowledge cannot be taken off the shelf and applied in ways that are relevant and effective without considerable interpretation, engagement and transformation. From this standpoint, *professional knowledge* is not useful until it has been put into action—‘unless and until it has been used for a professional purpose’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 120). This professional purpose—and the expertise acquired—has also been described in terms of *practical knowledge*, namely ‘types of knowledge that are derived from practice and validated in practice’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 65) and as *action knowledge*, which refers to the ‘skills or techniques that are involved in working directly or indirectly with clients’ (Osmond, 2005).

Within the realm of experience falls *personal* and ‘*craft*’ *knowledge*, covered later in this paper, and *tacit knowledge*—a term coined by Polanyi to describe the fact that it is possible for people to know—or to infer—more than they can sometimes say or identify (Polanyi, 1967, p. 68). It describes a situation in which the source of an understanding is not known—an experience that links to the importance of intuition (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, p. 28), ‘unconscious knowing’ (Osmond, 2005, p. 893) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996). Some writers place considerable emphasis on the importance of intuition in professional work and link this to practice expertise (England, 1986, p. 32): ‘... there will always be people who have an unusually developed yet untrained ability to understand others and to act upon that understanding. Social work can only be distinct because of the *reliability* with which its workers master such an unusually developed understanding’ (England, 1986, p. 33–4). However, it can be difficult to identify with confidence what constitutes intuition or tacit knowledge, although Gould argues that tacit knowledge ‘is amenable to investigation and explanation through various methods, including case studies, qualitative accounts of practice and, more usually, as knowledge-in-action’ (Gould, 2006, p. 119).

These different forms of knowledge—whether abstract, action-based or intuitive—are not in conflict but need to be viewed as complementing each other. At the same time, it is important to conceptualize all sources of knowledge as tentative—as hypotheses or judgements that are based on the best knowledge available to us at a given point in time—thereby ensuring that our judgements can be scrutinized and refuted in the light of new information or evidence to the contrary. Whilst this proposition sounds quite easy to put into effect, research suggests that is not the case. This ‘tendency to seek out evidence

that confirms a hypothesis, rather than searching for ‘disconfirming’ evidence’ (Taylor and White, 2006, p. 939), is termed *confirmation bias*. One reason for this difficulty begins with the way that theory and research evidence is taught on social work training courses, in which the link between theory and practice, or knowledge and its implementation, is not always made explicit or left for students and practitioners to unravel.

Knowledge framework

A number of frameworks have been put forward in recent years in an attempt to map the terrain of social work’s knowledge base. Some have been more focused on specific locations or areas of practice (Connolly, 2006; Gould, 2006) whilst others have addressed the absence of a comprehensive model of professional knowledge (Drury Hudson, 1997; Osmond, 2005). These publications cover important points about ‘the kinds of knowledge that can actually inform social work practice and the interconnections between them’ (Osmond, 2005, p. 882) and a number of key issues raised in these papers are explored in the framework I am about to describe. This contains some revisions to previous coverage of this theme (Trevithick, 2005a, 2005b) and categorizes knowledge under three headings that overlap and interweave: (i) theoretical knowledge; (ii) factual knowledge; and (iii) practice/practical/personal knowledge. The main advantage of this framework, which grew out of my own practice experience and conversations with social work colleagues, is that it offers a map of the knowledge landscape and signposts through this dense jungle—and does so in ways that avoid the danger of ‘being constantly given directions but never the map’ (Matthews *et al.*, 2003, p. 179).

These three types of knowledge, indicated in Figure 1, overlap and interweave in intricate ways and include the knowledge that all parties bring to the

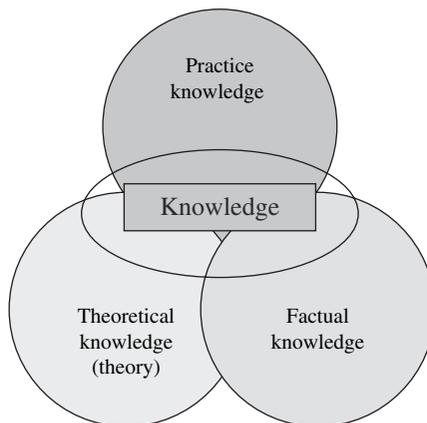


Figure 1

work, particularly service users and carers and including children. Figure 1 provides a simplified illustration of how knowledge is categorized in this paper. However, whilst all types of knowledge are represented as equal, in reality, this is unlikely to be the case. For example, some professions, such as medicine or dentistry, place a great deal of emphasis on factual knowledge and, for this reason, there is a focus on ‘learning by rote’ for medical and dental students. Most social work training courses are unlikely to approach the acquisition of knowledge by rote, but there can be considerable variation in the emphasis given to theoretical, factual and practice knowledge. Unlike medical and dental academics who still treat patients, social work academics are likely to encounter gaps in their practice knowledge: this is often bridged by contributions from practitioners, service users and carers. Finally, Figure 1 can illuminate the different learning styles and areas of interest that people possess. For example, some individuals are very much at home in the world of facts, whilst others might be more interested in the world of theory or practice—or perhaps all or some of these areas of knowledge at different points in their lives. It is important to recognize that all are important and that different areas of interest may compliment one another.

Theoretical knowledge (theory)

This first section categorizes theoretical knowledge, or theory, into three overlapping areas: (i) theories that illuminate our understanding of people, situations and events; (ii) theories that analyse the role, task and purpose of social work; and (iii) theories that relate to direct practice, such as practice approaches and perspectives.

Figure 2 provides a categorization of the different theories that influence social work. When taken together, they attempt to illuminate our understanding

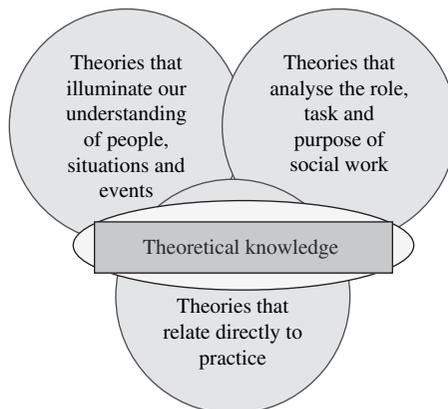


Figure 2

of (i) the nature of the problems presented; (ii) our role and responsibilities in relation to these problems; and (iii) the practice skills and interventions that we might recommend or use to work to address the problems presented. Again, the three areas identified can involve different dimensions. For example, a psychodynamic approach might place considerable emphasis on understanding why events are as they are, and work from identifiable boundaries of involvement—whereas other practice approaches might focus more on an approach that does not explore causation, such as cognitive-behavioural approaches.

Theories that illuminate our understanding of people, situations and events

Looking first at those theories that illuminate our understanding of people, situations and events, these ‘borrowed’ theories are mainly drawn from other disciplines and cover a vast area. They include psychology, sociology, law/legislation, social policy, organizational theory, medicine, politics/political science, economics, philosophy, history and anthropology. Some disciplines are drawn together in ways that overlap so that, for example, social work agency policy and practice are influenced to varying degrees by relevant legislation, social policy, economics and organizational theory, and perhaps social psychology. Whilst the influence of some disciplines may have declined in recent years, others have gained greater prominence. For example, on UK social work training programmes, I have experienced a shift in the importance given to sociology. In relation to practice, we see less emphasis on social causation and greater prominence being attributed to medicine and the ‘medicalization’ of personal and social problems (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2000, p. 222). Social and developmental psychology continues to be important in social work in the UK but, at this point, it is important to remember that the influence that different disciplines hold, both in universities and in practice settings, can differ from place to place and from country to country and that we have much to learn from one another in this area.

However, one of the problems with a broad range of abstract theories drawn from diverse sources is that they can be difficult to organize into a coherent framework and difficult to relate in practice. The result is a formidable knowledge mountain—a problem addressed later when we look at factual knowledge. Also, some ‘borrowed’ theories tend to be based on ideological assumptions, such as Western or Eurocentric assumptions (Robinson, 1995, 1998) about human beings and human behaviour—assumptions that do not always sit easily with social work’s value base. The emphasis placed on anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice could be seen as an attempt to counter these ideological biases and assumptions.

It is important to recognize that service users and carers—including children—build up a body of knowledge about people, situations and events in order to

make sense of their lives and to understand others. This knowledge, which is sometimes described as ‘expert by experience’, is more than experience. It is an attempt to theorize or to explain what is happening and why, and to bring these explanations into some kind of coherent understanding. As human beings, it is through our attempts to understand that we are able to predict and to gain a degree of control over events. This need to understand can be seen in an individual’s attempt to explain thoughts, feelings and behaviour that is motivated by a desire to understand how and why they, and others, behave in certain ways. The same situation applies to children. The explanations given may not always be accurate or coherent and may require some unravelling but, nevertheless, they need to be sought and seen as important. For example, I once worked with a young eight-year-old boy who was accused of bullying. John insisted that his hands and feet were nothing to do with him—in his own words, ‘they do it and I can’t stop them’. John’s desire and determination to understand his behaviour, and the link between cause and effect, were the basis of our work together.

Theories that analyse the role, task and purpose of social work

This second of three headings on the subject of theoretical knowledge looks at theories that analyse the role, task and purpose of social work—a subject fraught with disagreement. Should social work be about reform or revolution—should it ‘fit’ people into the system, change the system—or both? Is social work primarily a rational–technical activity or a practical–moral one (Parton, 2000)? The role, task and purpose of social work have been conceptualized in a number of ways but perhaps the most relevant and accessible is Howe’s categorization of the activities of social work, which are identified in terms of three key features: (i) care; (ii) cure; and (iii) control (Howe, 1994). This conceptualization enables us to identify the ideological shift that has taken place in recent years away from notions of care and cure, toward those involving surveillance, investigation and control, such as parenting orders, curfews, the tagging of children, Community Treatment Orders and ‘welfare to work’ programmes. These changes have resulted in the fragmentation of services and the diversion of much-needed funding away from direct services and toward managerial and bureaucratic priorities, such as monitoring. In many sectors of social work, this shift has resulted in a reduction in the range and quality of care available and placed practitioners in an impossible position because they are not able to offer the range of services that service users and carers request and expect to be provided. This denies the knowledge that service users and carers have of their situation and needs. It also denies the opportunity for practitioners to use their knowledge and skills to rectify the underlying causes that give rise to certain dilemmas (cure) and to give voice to the ‘social ills’ that disadvantage certain sectors of the population.

Theories that relate to direct practice, such as practice approaches and perspectives

A third and final heading on the subject of theoretical knowledge focuses on theories that are taught on training courses and used by practitioners in their direct work with service users and carers. This heading is fraught with problems because academics and practitioners do not necessarily share a common language to describe different aspects of direct practice—‘making the distinction between theories, models, frameworks, paradigms, perspectives and knowledge a mental slippery slide’ (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2005, p. 101). Some academics have approached this dilemma by leaving key areas of practice undifferentiated and without a categorization. On the other hand, where different areas of practice are categorized, we see different terms emerging, both within the UK and abroad. For example, different practice expertise can lie in a range of different contexts, such as work with individuals, groups/groupwork, families, communities and work with organizations. These areas may be called *methods of intervention* (Thompson, 2000), *fields of practice* or *practice methods* (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2005, p. 149). This lack of agreement and consistency in relation to terminology is not only confusing but can make it difficult for social workers to articulate what they know. It serves as a reminder of the limited priority given to defining key concepts commonly used in social work.

The main practice theories or practice methods taught on social work training programmes include cognitive-behavioural approaches, client-centred, task-centred, psycho-social approaches, solution-focused and strength-based approaches, and so on. In this paper, the term ‘practice theories’ is used to describe a coherent body of theory and a conceptual language that attempts to explain, and to intervene to change, certain aspects of behaviour or a particular course of events. These theories are ‘often used eclectically, in combination’ (Payne, 2000, pp. 332–3) and, it is argued, ‘except for a limited number of problems, no single theory has proven to be more effective and others ineffective in treating certain problems’ (Hepworth *et al.*, 2002, p. 17). It is questionable as to whether we have sufficient research to support this statement but what is clear is that service users and carers greatly value the human qualities of warmth, interest, concern, acceptance and the ‘interpersonal skills’ that social workers bring to their work (Sheppard, 1997).

Perspectives are frequently employed alongside specific practice theories. These describe a partial ‘view of the world’ (Payne, 1997, p. 290) and can involve exaggerating or overstating a particular feature, such as the racist, gender or class assumptions evident in a particular situation, at the expense of temporarily understating others. Perspectives are important because they often add a sociological, contextual or political understanding of events or behaviour—sometimes described in terms of social work *values*. It can be difficult to differentiate between a practice theory and a perspective—so much depends on how these terms are conceptualized and used in a particular context. The main perspectives include anti-oppressive/anti-discriminatory perspectives,

anti-racist, children's rights, feminist, radical/progressive/activist, social model of disability, service users/carers' perspective—and so forth. Again, when working with people who seek a social work service on a voluntary basis, it is important to involve service users and carers in the different implementation approaches, and practice theories and perspectives that can be used to address particular dilemmas and to elicit their views on which approaches they feel might be most valuable—given their knowledge of themselves and other relevant factors.

This first section on theoretical knowledge has covered three areas: theories that illuminate our understanding of people, situations and events; theories that analyse the task and purpose of social work; and practice theories and perspectives that are sometimes used in direct work. Their task is to inform understanding and action. These methods, theories and perspectives also incorporate a range of generalist and specialist skills and interventions that cannot be included in this paper but are covered elsewhere (Trevithick, 2005a, pp. 60–89). The point to be stressed is that it is important to elicit the knowledge that all parties bring to the encounter but until more in-depth research becomes available, it is not possible to say with confidence which methods of intervention, practice theories and perspectives work best with particular groups of people or with specific problems.

Factual knowledge

Theories developed in the past need to be updated by research and new developments in the field and, in this framework, these are described in terms of factual knowledge. Like theoretical knowledge, factual knowledge covers a vast area and is difficult to order in ways that are relevant to social work. This section looks at factual knowledge in terms of five key areas in which more up-to-date information and research are important. These include: (i) law/legislation; (ii) social policy; (iii) agency policy, procedures and systems; (iv) information relating to specific groups of people; and (v) information relating to specific personal and social problems. These five areas have distinct features but they also overlap in important ways and link to points covered in the first section on theoretical knowledge in which we looked at the broad range of theories that social work 'borrows' in order to understand people, situations and events.

Some common terms used to describe factual information include data, statistics, figures, records, research findings or evidence, proof, and so forth, namely 'hard' facts that are verifiable in some way or other. At this point, it is important to note that in this paper, research is not conceptualized as a distinct form of knowledge in its own right but as a means by which knowledge is sought and acquired (Trevithick, 2005a, pp. 53–9). It is an activity—and a skill—that mainly confirms, revises or refutes existing knowledge, or, when confronted with new findings, creates new hypotheses. New research findings have no value until they are brought alive through interpretation and the injection

of meaning: this can lead to the development of new theories. Interestingly, the Australian Association of Social Work includes research as a main area of practice (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2005, p. 81).

The five key areas included under the heading *factual knowledge* are indicated in Figure 3. Again, we see that all overlap and interweave but are described as distinct categories, to indicate that they call for different types of knowledge. Of central importance is the way that legislation and social policy, shaped by government policy, regulate agency policies and procedures (Trevithick, 2005a, p. 11). Another point worthy of note is the extent to which social policy, legislation and agency policy are based on a sound understanding of human beings and the personal and social problems that different groups experience.

The extent to which factual information is covered on social work courses is unclear. There is also a lack of clarity about where our distinct knowledge base lies (England, 1986, pp. 33–4; Gould, 2006; Sheppard, 1997), particularly in relation to the factual knowledge that practitioners need. In other professional training, such as medicine and nursing, acquiring factual knowledge is core activity that supports a sense of professional identity. I would argue that our professional credibility is seriously undermined if we do not have certain key facts at our fingertips and that it may not be ‘good enough’ to know where to find this information. I can recall several situations, particularly multi-professional conferences and reviews, in which to have been able to present factual information in support of my argument would have been enormously valuable and possibly changed the course of events. Factual information of this kind can take several forms. Perhaps the most important area of factual knowledge can be found in relation to aspects of legislation that govern social work but it can

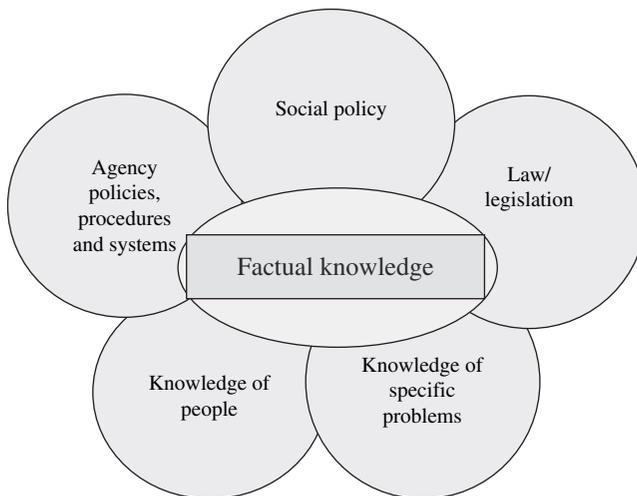


Figure 3

also include the findings of recent research. The following section looks in more detail at the importance of updated factual knowledge in relation to five areas of social work.

Law/legislation

Since the late 1980s, several major pieces of legislation have been introduced. In addition, other legislation has been added which, together with the reorganization of social service departments, have made it difficult for social services departments and practitioners to keep up to date with new legislation and government guidelines and to understand how to apply these in practice (Brammer, 2003, p. 9). This situation has been exacerbated by the poor coverage given to the subject of law on some social work training programmes (Ball, 1997, pp. 37–8), yet social work operates within an unmistakable legal mandate:

Social work is empowered, guided and controlled by its legal mandate. This mandate is made up of three elements. The first is organizational, in that most social work in the UK is practised from within the structures of the statutory social services. The second is functional, in that the law determines the powers and duties with which social work is endowed. The third is procedural, in that the law largely determines the nature and extent of social work accountability, both to service users and to the community generally (Roberts and Preston-Shoot, 2000, p. 183).

Social policy

Social policy looks at the development, organization and current policy frameworks in key areas and the way that the government allocates priority and public resources in areas such as housing, employment, social security, health care, education and personal social services. This section on social policy is separated from agency policy and procedures in order to enable us to identify the wider welfare picture within which social work is located. This helps us to see the shifts that have taken place in recent years in relation to the introduction of internal markets into health and social services in the 1990s ('contract culture') and the UK government's 'modernization agenda' (Cabinet Office, 1999) and the impact of these developments on the range and quality of services available to social workers, service users and carers. For example, in 2003/04, local authorities in England spent £16.8 billion on personal social services, with the largest single proportion—£7.4 billion or 44 per cent—being spent on people aged sixty-five and over (Office for National Statistics, 2006). However, the diversion of funds from the statutory sector to the private and charity sector has resulted in much of this funding being paid to private profit-making organizations that provide residential homes for older people.

Agency policies, procedures and systems

In support of legislation, the government draws up regulations, codes, guidance, duties and powers (Brammer, 2003, p. 481) which outline the expectations placed on local authorities. These are based on social policy but are translated into agency policies, procedures and abstract systems relating to specific sections of the provision—in our case, social work practice. The growing influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within social work and the development of ‘much more routinized and proceduralized’ systems, policies and procedures (Parton, 2006, p. 8), such as performance indicators, targets, objectives and other outcome measures, mean that practice knowledge is in danger of being confined within narrow boundaries. As a result, some would argue that a sense of confidence and trust in social workers’ knowledge, skills, judgments, decision-making abilities and professional discretion is being replaced by ‘rule governed behaviour and procedural imperatives’ (Smith, 2001, p. 288). For example, in a survey of 2,200 social care professionals, over half of the professionals surveyed stated that they spent more than ‘60 per cent of their time on administrative work as opposed to direct client contact’ (Samuel, 2005, p. 8).

Specific groups of people

This factual information may be categorized in terms of people’s class, race, gender, age, disability(ies), sexual orientation, culture and religious beliefs and provides a general picture of the trends in life opportunities and vulnerability to adversity that different groups may experience and their location in the social structure. For example, in 2002, the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population in Great Britain owned 23 per cent of the marketable wealth (Office for National Statistics, 2006), whereas 12.4 million people or 22 per cent of the population were living in low-income households (Palmer *et al.*, 2005).

Specific personal and social problems

Another important source of factual knowledge is focused on specific social problems—problems in relation to drug and alcohol addiction (Barber, 2002), child abuse (Corby, 2006; Doyle, 1997), domestic violence (Hague and Malos, 2005), depression (Stewart and Darton, 2006; NICE, 2003), the manifestations of normal grief (Worden, 2000, pp. 20–8) and problems that are the result of adversity or the long-term impact of deprivation and disadvantage. For example, the indicators found in *Social Trends* (Office for National Statistics, 2006) show neglect as the most common reason for children being placed on the child protection register—a situation affecting 45 per cent of boys and 43 per cent of girls. In the same survey, the second most common reason was

emotional abuse, with around a fifth of both boys and girls on the register suffering from this form of abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2006).

In relation to social work, factual information and research of this kind are only valuable if they are interpreted and tested against other research findings and social trends and if they are also linked to other forms of knowledge. And just as facts need to be underpinned by theory, theory needs to be underpinned by facts (Taylor and White, 2006)—and both need to underline direct practice to ensure that this is knowledge-based. In this task, it is vital to note that service users and carers often have direct, personal and up-to-date knowledge of legislation, different social policies, agency policy and procedures, and their respective benefits and limitations. They also have first-hand knowledge of how they and others live and the kind of personal and social problems being encountered, often on a daily basis. Their accounts can be ahead of any research findings in these areas and an invaluable source of information. Indeed, many service users and carers have far more direct knowledge and experience of, say, the workings of our social welfare system than most generic social workers can ever acquire and, for this reason, it is important for us to recognize and to acknowledge this pool of knowledge and to use this information creatively. It is recognition of this kind that can produce profound change because it locates ‘the personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding’ (Sweeney, 2006, p. 129).

Practice/practical/personal knowledge

A third and final section of this knowledge framework describes the way that knowledge can be applied to the world of social work practice. It begins with an account of how this subject has been conceptualized and then looks at practice knowledge in terms of three overlapping themes: knowledge acquisition, knowledge use and knowledge creation. It describes the different ways that *knowledge that is already known* is acquired and applied and also the way that *new knowledge* can be created. Although not covered in detail in this paper, an integral feature of practice/practical knowledge is the personal knowledge and life experience that practitioners have acquired and, importantly, the personal knowledge that service users and carers have gained which in this paper is seen to include more than personal experience but also the theoretical, factual and personal/practical knowledge that they bring to the encounter.

Practice knowledge describes the way that theoretical and factual knowledge can be used to inform effective practice. This subject has been conceptualized in a number of ways—as the conversion of *knowing-in-action* to *knowledge-in-action* (Schön, 1991, p. 59); as *practical knowledge* and as *action knowledge* which ‘may include all types of knowledge . . . Some of it will have been thoroughly thought out and used in a deliberate manner that can be justified and explained. Some of it will be used intuitively with varying degrees of self-awareness’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 17). Gambrill prefers the terms *domain-specific*

knowledge or *procedural knowledge* to describe ‘the skills required to implement content knowledge . . . What facts may be important to know? What theories and concepts will be helpful? What skills do you need to use this knowledge effectively?’ (Gambrill, 1997, p. 102). Practice knowledge is, in effect, the way that ‘book knowledge’ is transformed and made relevant and useable. Figure 4 illustrates the overlap that exists in relation to knowledge acquisition, use and creation. We often do not know if we have acquired knowledge until we attempt to use it—and this act in itself could create new knowledge and more in-depth understanding.

Knowledge acquisition

In social work, the knowledge that we acquire has to be relevant and capable of being used in different situations and contexts. Indeed, we cannot reliably know what knowledge we have acquired until we attempt to apply that knowledge—an action and a process that can refute, clarify and/or transform received knowledge. How we learn or acquire knowledge can influence how it is used: knowledge that is learned by rote can be communicated in a disaffected way. On the other hand, it is possible to acquire knowledge that cannot be applied because the context does not authorize its use—a criticism that has been levelled at managerialism.

Broudy *et al.* (1978, p. 135) identify a number of ways that knowledge can be acquired—by instruction (e.g. ‘by the end of this lecture you will be able to . . .’), incidentally (e.g. knowledge that abounds in a ‘learning environment’) and by discovery (e.g. the sense of curiosity that motivates problem-based learning). Although considerable focus is placed on more formal sources of knowledge, knowledge gained incidentally or by discovery are routes that can be open to all people, including service users and carers. In relation to modes of instruction, Broudy *et al.* (1978) cite four types: knowledge acquired through replication,

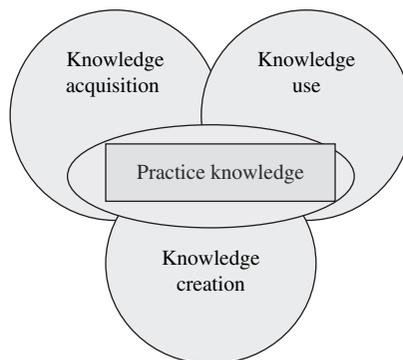


Figure 4

application, interpretation and association (Broudy *et al.*, 1978, p. 161). Instruction or teaching that is focused on *replication* can lead to a store of useful facts that can be 'indispensable to life and thought' (Broudy *et al.*, 1978, p. 49), such as the ability to remember the major pieces of legislation that shape social work practice, and the powers and responsibilities assigned to social workers. However, an overuse of replication can be atheoretical, inflexible and become mindless duplication. An *applicative* mode of learning involves more than recalling and reciting what is known to include problem solving and demonstrating initiative but this tends to be confined within prescribed rules and procedures. Whilst replicative and applicative modes of instruction have their place, for Eraut (1994), professional education needs to include interpretive and associative modes of instruction and knowledge use. In Eraut's conceptualization, an *interpretive* mode 'implies an interplay between theory and practice' and an *associative* mode is one that applies more creative, semi-conscious and intuitive forms of knowledge to make links and to 'serve as carriers for theoretical ideas' (Eraut, 1994, p. 29).

In recent years, we have seen some attempts to move away from more didactic 'talk and chalk' forms of learning within social work to problem-based and action learning models. This has included an emphasis on a *process* approach to knowledge acquisition and use, in which the focus is on 'the cognitive or reasoning processes which are used in practice situations to inform decision-making' (Sheppard *et al.*, 2001, p. 864). Other innovative teaching approaches include those that focus on using 'probabilistic causation' (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003, p. 157) and the use of 'critical incidents' (Fook *et al.*, 2000; Taylor, 2006) to promote reflexivity, critical engagement and to enhance practice decision making. How well students acquire knowledge using these more innovative approaches depends, in part, on the teaching and staff resources made available, students' learning styles and capacity to embrace more active and demanding teaching methods. Whatever approach is used, a dilemma remains as to whether students should be taught subjects that mirror the more bureaucratic demands, priorities and pressures of current contemporary practice or 'should we retain the focus on inter-personal skills and on engaging with the worlds of service users?' (Richards *et al.*, 2005, p. 409).

So far, I have focused on more intellectually based approaches to knowledge acquisition—sometimes referred to as *knowing what*. However, it is in the area of practical knowledge acquisition—or *knowing how*—that we encounter difficulties. This is demonstrated in the limited coverage and low status given to practice skills teaching on many social work training programmes in which it is possible to encounter social work skills being taught with no underpinning reference to theory and, on other programmes, theory is being taught with little attempt to relate this knowledge to practice. This situation hinders any attempt to link theory and practice and has led to an under-theorizing of social work practice skills and interventions. Skills development involves creating opportunities for skills and interventions to be taught, rehearsed and practised repeatedly, which includes time being set aside for preparation and feedback. The absence of a coherent framework to link theoretical and practice knowledge is

evident in the absence of an agreed taxonomy of terms to describe theories that inform practice and a difficulty that is repeated in relation to continuing professional development (CPD) and post qualifying (PQ) teaching and learning.

Knowledge use

For knowledge to be valuable, it has to be relevant and presented in a form that is capable of being used. This is sometimes described as ‘practice validity’ (Sheppard, 1998, p. 763), ‘fit for use’ (Pawson *et al.*, 2003, p. 39) or ‘knowledge utilization’ (Fisher, 2002, p. 42). In relation to the sources of knowledge that social workers value and trust, studies undertaken in the USA suggest that practitioners use ‘consultations with colleagues and supervisors, workshops on practice issues, theoretical books and articles, and empirical books and articles’ (Marsh, 2002, p. 101). In other words, practitioners tend to draw on more accessible and immediate knowledge sources and more personal and interactive points of contact. This picture is supported in other research findings that indicate a heavy reliance on agency policy and procedures (Drury Hudson, 1997; Rosen, 1994)—which is a highly accessible form of knowledge, but the danger is that policies and procedures (factual knowledge) can be presented within agencies as the only source of knowledge that social workers need to acquire and apply. The tendency to use accessible forms of knowledge is not limited to social work but found in other disciplines and studies. For example, a UK medical study found that medical clinicians rarely used explicit research evidence but instead tended to be informed by their own and other colleagues’ experience, particularly the more in-depth knowledge that *opinion leaders* have acquired about specific subjects (Gabbay and le May, 2004, p. 1013). This makes it important to differentiate between the use of research and the use of other forms of knowledge.

The limited use of research to inform action is evident in social work and may, in part, be due to limitations in the quality, range, accessibility and applicability of the research available, the extent to which certain agencies promote and encourage a ‘research-minded’ approach and the way that research is taught on training courses. For example, the findings of a research study undertaken in Israel found that social workers almost never used research-based knowledge in their decision making (Rosen, 1994). This view is also evident in a UK research study in which other forms of knowledge, such as references to the law, tended to be referred to indirectly (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003). Rosen’s research findings also revealed a reliance on explanatory forms of knowledge to guide practice, such as theories relating to human behaviour, and a tendency to neglect ‘action knowledge’. A similar difficulty is evident in the importance given to a values perspective where it is argued that, in the past, social work values have been allowed to become ‘a substitute for knowledge and understanding’ (Jones, 1996, pp. 190–1). This can be particularly worrying when a values perspective is being used uncritically or to justify decisions for unsound reasons (Taylor and White, 2006). On the other hand, social work values can play a vital role to promote

and advocate for social justice and to ensure that service users' voices and knowledge are not ignored (Gould, 2006) or subjugated.

Since we use knowledge in order to be effective, it is important to look briefly at how effectiveness has been conceptualized because considerable controversy exists in this area. For Cheetham *et al.* (1992), 'social work is effective in so far as it achieves intended aims' (Cheetham *et al.*, 1992, p. 10). This 'involves measuring the outcomes of social work intervention against its objectives' (McIvor, 2000, p. 121). This can lead to the obvious danger that the objectives can be set very low and be virtually meaningless. So much depends on the context, particularly who sets the aims and objectives and at what level—service users, carers, practitioners, agencies or governments—and how evidence is conceptualized, acquired, analysed and implemented (Webb, 2001). For example, as an Education Welfare Officer, the effectiveness of my work was measured on how many young people I encouraged to return to school—a tick-box approach. School attendance is important but my actions said little about whether these young people were able to learn. However, whilst the measures of attendance I collated had limited meaning, some of the relationships I was able to create were meaningful, which makes it important to remember that the absence of evidence does not necessarily mean the absence of benefit.

In terms of the results achieved, I would argue that too much emphasis is placed on the performance of practitioners and too little on other factors that influence practice effectiveness. In this paper, three factors influence effectiveness. First, the knowledge, skills, understanding, values and motivation that social workers bring to the work. Second, the knowledge, skills, understanding, values and motivation that service users and carers bring and, third, the extent to which the work is aided by agency resources and services and the degree, range and quality of social support networks that can be accessed within the wider community, social system and work environment. This perspective highlights the interrelationships between individual and structural factors. It is the responsibility of practitioners to ensure that the knowledge and skills that all parties bring are set at a level at which these elements can be used effectively. However, the success of this strategy—and the effectiveness of the work—may be hindered by elements outside practitioners' immediate control, such as the absence of appropriate resources and services (Carvel, 2005; Harris, 2003). Given these complexities, particularly the confused relationship between research and other forms of knowledge, more debate and research studies are needed to analyse what forms of knowledge are being used by front line social work practitioners and to what effect in terms of the extent to which knowledge, research and the availability of resources, services and other funding lead to practice effectiveness.

Knowledge creation

Practitioners not only acquire and use knowledge but can also generate new knowledge based on their practice experiences—sometimes described in terms

of *practitioner-generated knowledge*. What we mean by this term can be difficult to identify because, in reality, we know little about the theories and concepts that are used on an everyday basis in social work. This is partly due to the fact that social work practice ‘has not yet been defined as a research site’ (Preston-Shoot, 2004, p. 30) and also because knowledge use and knowledge creation cannot be easily separated. Indeed, Eraut (1994) argues that the ‘interpretive use of an idea in a new context is in itself a minor act of knowledge creation’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 54), although this comment tells us nothing about the quality of the new knowledge created. The way that different theories are interpreted or knowledge modified to ensure transferability between one context and another are examples of the creative use of knowledge. This same interpretation and modification can also be taking place among service users and carers in their efforts to understand themselves, others and the world they inhabit. Looking first at the notion of *transferability*, I would argue that for knowledge and skills to be transferable, they have to be related to a sound knowledge base and an understanding of human beings in their particular social contexts. This includes an understanding of sociology and psychology, and other relevant theories in relation to human behaviour. ‘The final factor for skill development which is reliable and transferable is an understanding of theories of human behaviour so that skills are related to individual clients and not just routine behaviour’ (Parsloe, 1988, p. 8). They also have to be reliable and enduring across different—often difficult—situations and to be capable of being used in ways that demonstrate a degree of accuracy and efficiency (Trevithick, 2005a, p. 75). This ability to transfer knowledge and skills is an intellectual activity, as well as a practical one and a feature of *competence* (GSCC, 1996, p. 16). Linking knowledge and skills to practice contexts, and then theorizing about the practice situations we have encountered and experiences we have acquired, places theory and practice constantly in dialogue, with each informing the other in ways that ‘invigorate, fascinate and professionally uplift’ (Howe, 2002, p. 87).

The transferability of knowledge and skills in this way is sometimes referred to as *practice wisdom*, which describes knowledge that is derived from personal and professional experience about what constitutes effective action in a given practice situation (Stepney, 2000, p. 21). For Sheppard, it combines ‘three main and distinct sources: knowledge gained from “everyday life”, derived from the process of living in society and interacting with others; knowledge gained from social science, specifically research and ideas; and knowledge gained from the conduct of social work practice’ (Sheppard, 1995, p. 279). This can also be described as *craft knowledge* (Eraut, 1994, p. 64), namely knowledge and expertise that is gained through experimentation, problem solving and practice-based activities. However, practice wisdom and craft knowledge are not always ordered in ways that reveal an identifiable knowledge base or in ways that can be differentiated from more common-sense notions. This can make it difficult to find a reliable mechanism that can evaluate the extent to which practice wisdom or craft knowledge informs knowledge creation, transferability and, ultimately, practice effectiveness.

The current situation means that ‘the knowledge-development potential of practitioners is under-exploited’ (Eraut, 1994, p. 54). This is partly due to work pressures, funding and resource limitations, the difficulty identifying and articulating a precise practice language and a distinct knowledge base, and a context and culture that struggle to recognize the central place that reading, writing, teaching and conferences play to enhance practice knowledge, expertise and scholarship. To change this picture involves taking a broader view of what constitutes knowledge and creating new opportunities for practitioners so that we can learn from their practice experiences—successful or otherwise. It includes reviewing the quality of CPD and PQ programmes and linking these to concrete indicators of professional knowledge and skill development, encouraging practitioners to undertake post-graduate study and to write about their work (Staudt *et al.*, 2003), and creating opportunities for practitioners to teach and to present papers at conferences.

It could also involve looking again at how we can make knowledge more accessible on a day-to-day basis, and how do this in ways that are not merely ‘a simply technical information-providing function’ (Shaw, 2005, p. 1248) but one that promotes critical practice. This could involve creating employment opportunities for *practitioner-researchers*, namely practitioners who spend the majority of their time on direct work but who also undertake research on the everyday problems encountered in their agency. Here, the emphasis is on knowledge creation that is generated through research whereas other initiatives focus on the dissemination of knowledge by, for example, practitioners adopting the role of a designated opinion leader or knowledge broker. Indeed, research could be seen as one of the most important areas of knowledge creation. *Opinion leaders* are those individuals who have more advanced and specialist knowledge, skills, experience and/or personal attributes in relation to a particular subject area or aspect of practice. Other practitioners are encouraged to access this knowledge and experience which may be located, for example, in relation to court procedures or certain areas of law/legislation, or the use of specific interventions with regard to work with troubled or distressed individuals. In a similar vein, the role of a *knowledge broker* can include a more interpretive function in relation to research by, for example, linking practitioners to relevant research or linking people who use knowledge to those individuals who research or created knowledge (International Development Research Centre, 2004).

On the one hand, we know little about the theories that inform much of the direct work that social workers undertake and, on the other hand, we see new theories being introduced from outside social work. For example, Sheldon (2000) acknowledges that much of the research to support the effectiveness of behaviourist and cognitive-behavioural therapy originates from psychologists and the work of clinical social workers based in North America and that the claims made tend to be based on ‘discrete problems in somewhat protected settings’ (Sheldon, 2000, p. 70). Research of this kind is not best positioned to address the complexity of social work practice and the difficulties that practitioners can

encounter when working within and across different contexts and different expectations (Fook, 2000). Or, again, it is stated that the only practice approach to have been developed directly from social work practice is task-centred work (Ford and Postle, 2000, p. 52). One point that is striking about the discourse on knowledge and knowledge creation is the fact that the voice of practitioners is largely absent. This reflects the ongoing tension that exists in the relationship between theory and practice, and confusion about the relationship between knowledge and research. If practitioners are not using research, this does not necessarily imply that their work is not knowledge-based.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the knowledge base of social work in terms of three interweaving features: theoretical knowledge (or theory), factual knowledge (including research) and practice knowledge (including practice/practical/personal knowledge and experience). It has highlighted the complexities that underpin the way that knowledge is acquired, used and created within social work and attempted to do so in ways that embody the knowledge that all parties bring to the encounter. In particular, this paper has argued that the knowledge that service users and carers contribute is more than experience but also includes knowledge—theoretical, factual and personal and practical knowledge. Since most of the published works on the subject of social work knowledge tend to be written by academics, it is hoped that this paper will make this complex subject accessible to social work practitioners, students, service users and carers in ways that encourage their contribution to the debate on what constitutes—or should constitute—the knowledge base of social work.

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