

Editorial

It is a privilege to be asked to contribute an editorial to this edition of *Social Work & Social Sciences Review*. Whilst the papers which it brings together, at face value may seem to address very different policy and professional issues, in aggregate they hold up a mirror to the many dimensions of organisational change. In most of these instances there will have been or continue to be, a number of political drivers behind the various developments explored by the authors. Each of the papers – some more, some less explicitly – set a specific socio-political context for the respective public policy phenomenon analysed, including, where relevant, international and cross-disciplinary characteristics. In doing so each author fulfils the journal's expressed mission to overcome multidisciplinary barriers to understanding the way in which social problems are addressed, and provide a multi-faceted opportunity to explore the balance between empirical and ideological influence.

Social history and social policy writers have, of course, long banished any lingering notion of the existence of value-free approaches to the management of welfare, even in the potentially sentimentalised world of services for children and their families. For example, a key current element in the English policy backdrop to this edition of the journal is the UK coalition government's 2014 Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. This exemplifies both the interplay between ideology and evaluation; and the power of party-political colonisation of the organisational change process. Innocuous language, such as 'significant and sustained improvement in outcomes for vulnerable children' ; and 'better life chances' is deployed to argue a need to 'innovate and re-design service delivery to achieve improved outcomes and better value for money'. However, this same period has seen the successful passage through Parliament of a Statutory Instrument, which has extended the power for local authorities to outsource almost all their child and family social care functions, by extending Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 to include child-in need and child protection decision making powers. It was passed after a brief debate and without a vote, despite a vociferous campaign by children's services experts including researchers, and after strong opposition party speeches. These all pointed out the absence of a sound evidence base for the move, as well as the potentially serious risks it poses to the viability of services to vulnerable children and their families.

In addition to the influence which political ideology brings to the shaping of policy trends, it also impacts on the nature of related evaluation activity. Perhaps most 'unhelpfully' the ability of evaluation science to influence the direction of legislative change will always be constrained by the paradox between political desire to espouse

'ultimate life time outcomes' and the impact of government time frames on the feasibility of measuring them. Electoral cycles mean that politicians want short-term, but simultaneously sweeping conclusions, and frequently prioritise the commissioning of research accordingly.

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As the contributors to this issue demonstrate, they and other evaluators of change shoulder a heavy moral as well as technical responsibility, as do those who commission their services. In every country represented by the contributions, to a greater or lesser extent, the tension between evidence-based policy and policy-based evidence permeates all areas of social policy. There is certainly more than a touch of irony in politicians such as the UK Coalition government seeking to replace a democratic principle of entitlement by placing token emphasis on a methodological concept of effectiveness, whilst ignoring research evidence which clashes with their ideological preferences.

The organisational topics addressed in this issue reflect a range of methodological traditions and span all levels of need, ranging from the most basic human right to food (Reineth & Pillay) through to the right to family life (Provencher & colleagues; Malin & colleagues). Moriarty and colleagues, and Pettersen and colleagues seek to illuminate debate about the efficacy of various professional roles involved in meeting these rights, which are of course, in some cases reframed as needs.

Reineth and Pillay have evaluated a programme to enhance the meeting of nutritional need in South Africa, in a social and political context which continues to entrench the social exclusion of the poor. Their research, drawing on qualitative methodologies, identifies the factors which hinder poverty reduction, including weak institutional environments, an absence of collaborative partnerships, and inadequate skills development for the poor.

Provencher and her colleagues explore the relationship between standard of proof and case outcome in child protection cases within the 50 individual USA states - plus the District of Columbia. All of these states set their own standards of proof. The researchers found a higher standard of proof decreased the likelihood the judge would rule in favour of the child protection services, although after trial increased the probability of an out-of-home placement.

Casey describes the high profile UK national Troubled Families Programme of which she is Director. It seeks to 'turn around' 120,000 families with multiple problems through a holistic approach to family intervention. Family access to support through the programme depends on their having been assessed as meeting some or all of key thresholds such as being involved in youth crime; truanting; or where parents are on out of work benefits.

Malin and colleagues describe the construction of an evaluation framework to measure the child and family outcomes facilitated by multi-agency contributions to support children through the adoption of a whole-family approach. They highlight the importance of access to evaluation tools which must be sensitive to both the ethos and the professional identity of approaches to family interventions.

Focussing on the qualifying start of a professional career, Moriarty and colleagues examine the different experiences of part-time as opposed to full-time social work students in relation to retention. Course completion rates for students supported by employers were higher than others, although students with disabilities were less likely to be seconded. These are all important issues given the politically-driven change being introduced in England to social work training, including a rebalancing of the relationship between university, research-led teaching, and practice-based learning in agencies.

The professional dimension of service provision is further addressed in the contribution by Pettersen and colleagues, who explored community-service-employee views of providing medication assisted rehabilitation services in Norway. Findings included the fact that particular tensions could arise between the general practitioners and municipal employees, and their conclusions highlight the advantages of approaches which deploy a psychosocial perspective rather than a more narrowly medical perspective.

The papers brought together by this edition of the journal proffer a set of current, multi-faceted insights into the ways in which evaluation can help build a sound knowledge base for social policy and social work practice. They are exemplars of the contribution that evaluation can and should make to service delivery. However the generation and existence of this knowledge base should not be confused with any guarantee it will actually inform politicians' decisions about the nature of social policy, including organisational change. The tension between empirical and ideological forces, currently very clearly visible in the UK, only serves to further validate the journal's aim of disseminating the interdisciplinary knowledge which can explain social problems and illuminate the path to possible knowledge-based responses, but not guarantee it will be followed.

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