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‘We know what we are, but know not what we may be’ – research-minded practitioners and their possible futures in social work

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'We know what we are, but know not what we may be' – research-minded practitioners and their possible futures in social work

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ABSTRACT

Social work is often presented with new concepts and methods that are taken to heart without much consideration. This study discusses one such new concept – research-minded practitioners – with the aim of investigating its possibilities. This has been done through a critical reading of three texts where the founders describe its building blocks and definition. It is concluded that it may be a viable concept, but it is still in its early days and more studies are needed. The connection between research-minded practitioners and the implied positive link to evidence-based practice is characterized as lacking a foundation. Suggestions are offered for further developing the concept.

KEYWORDS

Evidence-based social work; reflective social work; knowledge management; research-minded practitioner

Introduction

The expectations placed on social work have changed over the last 20 years. In parallel with discussions in other areas of society, social work is expected to be grounded in, and make use of, research findings, i.e. to be 'evidence-based'. Evidence-based social work was introduced in the late 1990s in England, Northern Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia (Bergmark and Lundström 2006; Diaz and Drewery 2016; van der Zwet, Kolmer, and Schalk 2016) and since then research-oriented practices have been a strong trend (McCrystal and Wilson 2009). By evidence-based practice is meant 'the integration of the best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values' (Sackett et al. 2000, 1). Paired with this, evidence-based practice has been continuously debated with regard to its strengths and weaknesses and, above all, the difficulty of implementing it (Diaz and Drewery 2016). Two ways of implementing evidence-based practice have emerged: the top-down *guideline-model*, in which best-practice guidelines are produced by health authorities for social workers to use; and the bottom-up *critical appraisal model*, which includes more active scrutiny of the evidence by the social worker (Liedgren and Kullberg 2014). Further, the critical appraisal model is based on the original five-step practice process proposed by Sackett et al. (2000). These steps are (1) *formulating an answerable question, (2) searching for the best research evidence, (3) critically appraising the research evidence, (4) selecting the best intervention after integrating the evidence with clinical expertise and client characteristics, preferences and values*, and finally (5) *evaluating the practice decisions*. These two ways of implementing evidence-based practice can also be connected to two theoretical frameworks and research areas. On the one hand, you have proponents of *implementation science*, the focus of which is to investigate and find the most effective ways to introduce research results in practice. Implementation science offers practitioners concrete strategies for integrating policy, programmes and interventions into their daily work (Cabassa

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Shakespeare, W. (1601). Quote from Hamlet (1601) act 4, sc. 5, l.

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2016). The other perspective is *knowledge management*, which is explained as the creation and uptake of knowledge, together with its analysis and distribution (Edge 2005). Although both perspectives are relatively new in general and are even newer to social work, they seem to have been accepted without any extensive, critical discussion of their theoretical validity in relation to social work (Palinkas et al. 2017). This article will deepen the discussion of a concept derived from knowledge management in relation to evidence-based social work, leaving aside implementation science for now.

In two articles and a conference paper, Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) and McBeath and Austin (2013, 2015) have suggested the concept – developed from knowledge management – of the *Research-Minded Practitioner* (henceforth RMP), which describes social workers with a particular interest in improving and developing social work practice. It is argued that RMPs are interested in knowledge and research as drivers of development, and that these social workers are characterized by their *curiosity, critical reflection* and *capacity for critical thinking*. These characteristics are even described as attributes and personal qualities (McBeath and Austin 2015, 447). It is also suggested that allocating resources to RMPs would be an effective way to develop social work in the direction of becoming more research-based. Researchers, as well as politicians, have also discussed possibilities to give certain social workers time to focus on research to improve social work practice. In Sweden since the late 1990s, some municipalities, in collaboration with local universities, have financed *municipal PhD Students*, that is, practitioners employed by the social services in the municipality who divide their time between a research project and regular social work, as a way to encourage the social services to become more research based and the local universities to do more practice-related research (SKL 2008; Tydén 2014). In England, Eileen Munro's (2012) proposal to designate *Principal Social Workers* to be in charge of improving the evidential foundation of the social work profession was later implemented as *Adult Principal Social Workers*. The idea of putting practitioners in charge of developing the practice is not new, but what the RMP perspective suggests is that RMPs are persons with a certain set of personal traits. Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) and McBeath and Austin (2013, 2015) further elaborate how organizations should best support RMPs (see also Bergmark and Lundström 2011; Björk 2016; Ponnert and Svensson 2011).

At this stage, when the concept of the RMP has not yet been empirically tested but only theoretically outlined in a few articles, the most important critical discussion concerns the viability of the concept. Yaffe (2015) has criticized the concept of the RMP, claiming that an RMP is essentially the same as an evidence-based practitioner, and that we might as well use that term. I do not agree with Yaffe's criticism because the evidence-based practitioner has never been described as someone expressing an aspect of his or her character when pursuing evidence-based practice.

Arguments for supporting RMPs have included that doing so would be a way to implement evidence-based practice in social work. But is being an RMP really a personal trait? If it is a personal trait, it would be simple to develop a test: find these practitioners and put them to work. The aim of this article is to investigate the possibilities of the RMP concept in social work. The article will be structured around these research questions:

(1) How is the RMP concept constructed?
(2) How can the building blocks of the RMP concept be understood?
(3) How can the RMP concept be further developed?

The study is a theoretical analysis of the texts that present and discuss the concept of the RMP. This has been conducted by means of a thorough reading of three texts (Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012; McBeath and Austin 2013, 2015), which are where this version of the RMP concept is presented and described. The analysis process involved a disaggregation and critical discussion of the concept. In the section *Theoretical roots*, I present the theoretical background of knowledge management with background theories. This is followed by *Characteristics of research-minded practitioners (RMPs)*,

where I present the concept's building blocks – curiosity, critical reflection and critical thinking – together with an account of the theoretical reasons given by the authors. In *How the building blocks can be understood*, I go through the authors' description of the building blocks more thoroughly, commenting on the references upon which they base their argument. In the following section, *Discussion*, I more critically discuss the concept and argumentation, return to the argumentation for viewing research mindedness as part of the personality, discuss the connection with evidence-based practice, and suggest ways to further develop the concept. The article ends with *Conclusions* and *Implications for Social Work*. I will begin, however, with a section presenting the concept of the RMP and its history. When referring to authors in the text, it is the above-mentioned authors that are meant.

Background

The concept of RMPs, as used in this study, was first introduced in an article in 2012 (Austin, Dal Santo & Lee). It should not be confused with the similar concept of *research-mindedness*, which was developed in a project sponsored by the former Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) (Barn and Harrison 1995; Harrison and Humphreys 1997a, 1997b). This was the result of discussions between social workers, teachers of social work, external evaluators and students on the question of what they believe defines research-mindedness. The outcome of these discussions was that the concept was considered to convey an *interest* in research and ethical values.

The RMP concept that I am discussing in this article differs somewhat from the earlier concept of research-mindedness, because it does not explicitly include any ideas about the values/ethics of social work and focuses instead on how to apply and develop knowledge, and in doing so, improve the practice. McBeath and Austin (2013), relying on the fundamental assumptions of the theoretical framework knowledge management, claim that with the right support, RMPs, practitioners interested in research, would be the strongest proponents of, and agents for, the development and implementation of evidence-based practice in social work. An RMP, according to McBeath and Austin (2013, 6), is a person with certain personal characteristics that make him or her suitable for developing work practices as well as creating, using and spreading evidence. In a national Australian study by Gray et al. (2015), with the aim of investigating social workers' views on what factors obstruct or support evidence-based practice, it was found that 42% of the social workers preferred guidelines, while 41% would prefer to take part in the entire research process. These results are not direct evidence that RMPs exist, but they do point to a stratification within social workers as a group, with some being more interested than others in hands-on research, even if it is unclear whether they also possess the personal qualities associated with RMPs (McBeath and Austin 2015, 447). To sum up, the idea of the RMP is a theoretically constructed concept defined as a combination of personal traits, whereas research-mindedness is an empirical concept that appears to comprise an attitude or interest in combination with certain ethical values. Now, to understand more thoroughly what RMPs are, we need to go to their roots and look at knowledge management.

Theoretical roots

The theoretical foundation of the idea of RMPs is rooted in knowledge management, a framework originating in research within the for-profit sector and based on theories of organizational behaviour, organizational theory, strategic management, informatics, technology and innovation management, marketing, economics, psychology and sociology (Von Krogh 2002). The area of application of knowledge management has subsequently expanded to also encompass the public sector, and recently even the human services sector (Austin et al. 2008). Despite this, research employing knowledge management to examine results from studies within non-profit organizations is still rather scarce (see Satka, Kääriäinen, and Yliruka 2016). In a scientometric analysis of all published knowledge management studies up to August 2012, Serenko (2013) concludes that

knowledge management is an interdisciplinary field, based mainly on two schools of thought. On the one hand, it has a hard/technocratic/technology-centred side (computer science, knowledge systems, systems science, engineering, artificial intelligence and information technologies), and, on the other hand, a soft/behavioural/human-centred side (cognitive science, library and information science, philosophy, psychology, strategic management, organization theory and economics). Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006) state that the framework is rooted in three theories: *intellectual capital theory* and *intellectual property theory*, both of which are based on *information economics* (referred to as the hard side, above); and *core competence management* (referred to as the soft side, above).

Characteristics of research-minded practitioners (RMPs)

An RMP is described as possessing certain personal qualities or traits which can be designated *curiosity, critical reflection* and *critical thinking (*Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012; McBeath and Austin 2013, 2015). To understand the argumentation, the building blocks for the concept will be described one-by-one, as explained by the authors. As for *curiosity*, it is described as being interested in finding solutions to problems within social work. Following a thorough review of different theories on curiosity, Austin et al. clarify that their interpretation of curiosity is based on information gap theory, as developed by Loewenstein (1994) and explain that (Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012, 179–180):

(1) *Curiosity requires a pre-existing knowledge base and the need to 'prime the pump' to stimulate information acquisition in the initial absence of curiosity.*
(2) *To stimulate curiosity, it is important to recognize/increase staff awareness of manageable gaps in their knowledge, helping staff 'know what they don't know'.*
(3) *As staff gain knowledge in a particular area, they are not only likely to perceive gaps in their knowledge, but those gaps will become smaller relative to what they already know. Staff members are likely to become progressively more curious about the topic that they know the most about.*
(4) *The intriguing intersections of cognition and emotion suggest that interests promote learning.*
(5) *Curiosity-induced behaviours such as information seeking can play a meaningful role in workplace learning as well as in job performance.*

From these observations, Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) conclude that curious practitioners set challenges for themselves, others and their surroundings, in order to improve their knowledge and skills. Information or knowledge gap theory integrates the earlier division between state and trait curiosity, viewing curiosity as something emanating from both within and outside the person.

Critical reflection is about reflecting on the practical work and on oneself. In their article, Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) refer to it as the general thinking process that makes meaning from experience. In other words, it is about turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. By employing critical reflection, practitioners facilitate learning for their managers, themselves and their co-workers. Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) describe critical reflection as comprising three steps. The *first* step is creating awareness of a problem. This can be done through *dialogue journals, diaries, action learning groups, critical incidents, small group processes, autobiographical stories* and *sketching*. The *second* step involves analysing the problem or situation to clarify its essential aspects, and refers to Brookfield 1988; a reference by Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012, via Clark (2008) four processes for analysing critical reflections. The four processes are (1) assumption analysis – making 'taken-for-granted' notions of reality explicit; (2) contextual analysis, creating awareness of the cultural and historical aspects influencing the situation; (3) imaginative speculation, which includes creating room for questioning, understanding, and proposing alternatives; and finally, (4) reflective scepticism, which combines the first three processes. Finally, during the *third* and final step,

a *solution* is created and implemented, the primary outcome of critical reflection being an increased capacity to reflect and act.

Critical thinking is described as an eight-part procedure adapted by Elder and Paul (I have consulted the 2016 edition, although it is referred to the 1st edition from 2007 in the article by Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012) including *generating purpose, raising questions, using information, making use of concepts, making inferences, making assumptions, generating implications* and *embodying a point of view*. This amounts, in essence, to a thorough examination and evaluation of beliefs, arguments and actions, including alternative views.

How the building blocks can be understood

To scrutinize the viability of the RMP concept I will now look at each of the building blocks making up the concept. I have read the sources referred to in the articles and will comment on the findings in the text in relation to the discussed attributes.

Concerning *curiosity*, the field of psychology has initially been divided, with one side claiming it resides on the inside (state theory) and one side claiming it derives from an outside trigger (trait theory). Even though information gap theory integrates state and trait theory, Loewenstein (1994) highlights that, at the time of writing, there is not yet any explanation of why some people get interested in the topics they do. Later research, however, has further investigated the dimensions of curiosity. Kashdan et al. (2018), in three studies where they integrated previous theories and research on curiosity, found five factors which formed the Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale (5DC). Each factor was associated with a series of personality, emotion, and well-being measures, and through the analysis the researchers found evidence of four distinct types of curious people. *The Fascinated* (28% of sample) are described by the authors as individuals curious about life in general, social, open-minded, confident, enthusiastic and ambitious. *Problem Solvers* (28% of sample) are described as hard-working, independent and persistent. They are not so interested in luxurious activities but are more focused on the job at hand and less interested in understanding other people's minds. *Empathizers* (25% of sample) are socially perceptive, introverts, and prefer to observe, in contrast to taking part in activities, and likes to be in control of things; if they are not, anxiety arises. Lastly, *Avoiders* (19% of sample) are the least curious segment of the population. They are also the least confident and least educated, and tend, according to the authors, to avoid situations or things they have not mastered. This group experiences the most stress and avoids difficult situations, confrontations and searching, both outside as well as inwardly. The different groups had varying interests, areas of expertise, consumer behaviours and social media use. These results were also confirmed by an Israeli research team a year later (Birenbaum et al. 2019), confirming the result's applicability in a different cultural context as well. These results do not explain how curiosity arises but do shed some light on the differences between individuals.

Concerning *critical reflection*, it seems as if the reference from Clark (2008) on which Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) base part of their argumentation is an unpublished research paper that is now impossible to get hold of, and the second-hand citation is probably intended to refer to Brookfield's book from 1995[1] (not 1988, because it did not yet exist at that time). The four described processes for analysing critical reflection are not directly taken from Brookfield's book and are probably an adaption made in Clark's paper. Actually, many references in the 2012 article (Austin et al.) are second-hand references, making it difficult to understand with certainty the sources in the description. Anyhow, critical reflection should most likely be interpreted as a skill. Though it is not clearly stated in the text, it is described as a three-step process, taught by a teacher. That is the reason I interpret it as something you learn and develop.

When it comes to *critical thinking*, Elder and Paul (2016) clearly state that it is not a trait but a skill, something you learn. Furthermore, the difference between critical reflection and critical thinking is somewhat unclear. I conclude that critical reflection is more action oriented. Critical reflection is explained in brief as (1) becoming aware of a problem, (2) analysing the problem or

situation, and (3) creating and implementing a solution, whereas critical thinking is explained as examining and evaluating beliefs, arguments and actions, including alternative views. Therefore, I interpret critical reflection to be more action oriented, while critical thinking appears to be closer to taking a stance, i.e. to values and ethical considerations related to a problem or situation, and in this way, the concept of the RMP is closer to the original definition of research mindedness (Barn and Harrison 1995; Harrison and Humphreys 1997a, 1997b). To conclude: two of the three aspects of the RMP concept are considered to be skills and one to be a trait. Curiosity is presented as a trait and as possible to stimulate, while critical reflection and critical thinking are learned skills that are possible to train.

Discussion

The psychology of personality offers a broad spectrum of theories to explain personality, both as inherited and as learned from the environment (Cloninger 2009). Personality most likely is a result of both factors, as nicely formulated in McAdams and Pals (2006, 212) definition: *an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories complexly and differentially situated in culture*. Therefore, a concept based both on curiosity, seen as something inherited as well as accumulated, and on skills such as critical reflection and critical thinking, is possible.

Personality traits as such are most often hypothetical constructs (MacCorquodale and Meehl 1948), which means that theoretical terms are used to define traits, even though these are not visible to the eye. Instead, researchers use measurements and observations, which in any case are imperfect. If we can find that the same persons are indicated as RMPs by themselves, by peers and by instruments, we could conclude that the construct/concept of RMP is valid. There is not yet any standard that can measure whether or not a social worker is an RMP; what we can discuss at the moment is whether the concept seems to be viable in relation to observations. And, yes, as a social worker I would say that some social workers are more curious, reflective and critical than others. To this can be added the result from the previously mentioned study by Gray et al. (2015) indicating that both RMPs and non-RMPs can be found within the group of social workers.

That being said, the connection between RMPs and evidence-based practice needs to be questioned. Based on the attributes incorporated into the RMP concept, there is no logical connection between being an RMP and being a proponent of evidence-based social work practice. In one definition of RMPs, it seems that the authors are trying to describe them as such; McBeath and Austin (2015, 447) write:// … *research-minded practitioners – individuals with an affinity for empirical inquiry, critical thinking, and reflection allied with a commitment to data-driven organizational improvement* … //. This definition is a *persuasive definition* (Sohlberg and Sohlberg 2019), including a rhetorical element aiming to influence the reader to become positive towards the RMP. Even if it is possible to conclude that RMPs have an inclination for questioning, it is unclear why the definition of the concept should relate to data-driven improvement of the organization. Furthermore, since the definition seems to combine traits and skills, it is impossible to say whether RMPs are like this by nature or were formed to be so, and if so when.

I suggest two possible ways to develop our thinking about knowledge management and/or RMPs in relation to social work, one focusing on the individual level and the other on the organization.

Firstly, if we wish to keep the concept of RMP, it might be more fruitful to further develop it in connection with the new results within research on curiosity. Investigating what kind of curiosity social workers possess might make it possible to more clearly understand how to stimulate them, as well as to know what to expect; perhaps there are even different kinds of RMPs? It might also reveal how much people can develop their RMP characteristics in adulthood. It seems that the framework of knowledge management and the concept of the RMP do help to raise attention about knowledge accumulation and direct attention to organizations' responsibilities when it comes to supporting

social workers in their professional development, something which previous frameworks focusing on human service organizations have not done. The next step would be to develop a test for finding the RMPs and to give them opportunities to thrive. It seems that recent research has worked on narrowing the gap between the proponents of evidence-based practice and the proponents of practice wisdom, characteristics that may coincide in the RMP. Proponents of practice wisdom in social work have lately been less inclined to talk about social work as an art, and instead view it as both an art and a science (Samson 2015). Samson (2015) suggests that practice wisdom is a bridge between art and science. Practice-wisdom practitioners make use of evidence but also are artful and creative in pursuing their profession. Samson (2015) suggests that practice wisdom should be taught by supporting the development of *thinking skills, critical reflection* and *experimental learning*. These descriptions are very much like previous descriptions of RMPs, who are characterized by their *curiosity, critical reflection* and *capacity for critical thinking* (McBeath and Austin 2015, 447). Gambrill (2019), a proponent of evidence-based practice, has emphasized the vital importance of practitioners not just using evidence but also being critical of evidence, in a way that illustrates a critical-appraisal/bottom-up mode (Sackett et al. 2000), since the evidence in social work is often quite weak. Moreover, Gambrill stresses the importance of relationship and communication skills in working with clients. Evidence-based practice has previously been implemented, at least in Sweden, through a top-down strategy – the so-called guideline perspective – which generated a certain amount of resistance among social workers (Liedgren and Kullberg 2014). Marrying the two perspectives of social work as an art and as evidence-based practice might lead to greater acceptance among sceptical social workers.

Secondly, it is also possible to abandon the focus on the individual level and direct attention to the authors' many suggestions for implementing knowledge management in social work organizations. A number of articles (Austin et al. 2008; Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee 2012; McBeath and Austin 2013, 2015) provide explanations of knowledge management and suggestions for how it can be developed in the organization. Austin et al. (2008) list four barriers to implementing knowledge management, namely the organizational culture (the most important barrier/facilitator), the organizational structure, leadership, and education and reward systems. Moreover, six strategies are suggested to support the implementation of knowledge management, none of which is to look for certain individuals. Instead, they involve making organizational- and structural-level changes to transform the culture in terms of its attitude towards knowledge, and building structures that make use of and spread knowledge. One could suggest that the focus on the individual social worker in the texts from 2012, 2013 and 2015 discussed in this paper leads the reader in the wrong direction. If from the beginning the focus had been on the human service organization and its challenges, the suggestions regarding knowledge management might already have been tested. This can, however, still be done by using findings within implementation science from research on *organizational readiness for change* (ORC) (Weiner, Amick, and Lee 2008; Weiner, Lewis, and Linnan 2009). ORC is usually measured by *motivation for change, adequacy of resources, staff attributes, organizational climate*, and *training exposure and utilization*. ORC is concluded to be a feasible measure to identify organizations in which an implementation would succeed (Billsten et al. 2018; Lundgren et al. 2013). In this case, ORC could be used to find organizations willing and ready to implement knowledge management in social work. Control groups can be used during the implementation, and the results would reveal the possibilities for knowledge management in social work, and if positive, provide arguments in favour of a larger-scale implementation. This would better harmonize with the ideas of knowledge management, since the focus would be on the organization.

Conclusions

The study has scrutinized the concept and definition of the RMP, which is a theoretical concept inspired by knowledge management structured around curiosity, critical reflection and critical thinking, of which the first is viewed as a trait and the latter two as skills. It is concluded that it may

be a viable concept, but more studies are needed. The posited association between RMPs and having a positive attitude towards evidence-based practice is found to lack a foundation. Two suggestions are given to further develop the concept. The first is on the individual level, and concerns developing a tool to pinpoint the social workers who are RMPs and give them enough space in their activities to make organizations more knowledge based. The second is to find organizations that are ready for change and implement the proposals suggested by Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012) and McBeath and Austin (2013, 2015), to make them more focused on different aspects of knowledge.

Implications for social work

An organization that offers social workers opportunities to use and develop curiosity and knowledge would most likely attract social workers with similar interests, which would swiftly develop the social work practice. Many social workers would probably be interested in engaging with an organization that takes a stance for an environment encouraging knowledge. This would be a win-win situation for users in need of support, employers as well as social workers, and in this way would develop the profession and social work from the grass-roots level. In a reality where social work organizations constantly suffer from staff shortages, this would be a constructive effort. In this respect, 'we know what we are, but not what we may be'. But it might be worth finding out.

Note

1. Stephen Brookfield's book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* was first published 1995. The second edition was released 2017. I use the first edition in this article to be as close as possible to the argument cited in Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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