Critical Best Practice Perspective on Social Work - service centre for elderly people

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Author: Hoffer Kristina, social science (B.A.)

A. Introduction

In the following I will give a short theoretical input about the development and definition of the Critical Best Practice approach and then represent a small research project of myself which is based on the Critical Best Practice approach.

B. Theoretical introduction

1. The history of the Critical Best Practice Perspective

In our days social work and social care is under a negative sign in many Western societies. It is in a crisis. There are two main reasons for this situation:
The first reason is that in the latest time there have been a spate of public disclosure of system failures in some areas of social work. Especially in the mass media there is often a focus on the things that went wrong in social work and not on what is good. That leads to a negative impression of social work (Fergueson 2006).
One other reason is that in the 1970s there was a radical movement in social work education. It was dominated by social casework scorned as a method to individualize and control the poor and the oppressed. This method and especially how it was used was very controversial. Academics criticized that like this social work would be a part of the problem to social ills and not a solution as it should be. Since then a need of a critical awareness of social workers towards their work had been arisen. Their work should be critical reflected and there have been a call to focus on the critical theory (Fergueson 2006) .
Though this created a deficit view of the practice of social work. It created a view of a never good enough practice of social work. Until today literature of social work examples

of good practice does either not exist or is very deficient.

These all lead to a deficit culture of social work, leads to a social work which is characterized by lack of resources, just preventing the next mistake and just reaching performances standards.

2. Critical Best Practice

As my previous explications (cf. point I.1.) show the critical practice alone is not enough and incomplete. But to get to know what is missing, it is necessary to define the critical practice first:

According to Brecchin (2000) ,,critical practice" integrates four levels of knowledge and action: The first is to use a critically reflective self and sound skill base, further to work with a value base that respects other as equals, then to adopt an open approach to practice and finally to understand individuals in relation to socio-political and ideological context that means to consider them in their environment.

The ,,critical practice" approach not solve the problem that examples of a good practice is missing and that the focus is always on the mistakes and problems of social work.

That is way are conception of both, of ,,critical practice" which incorporates ,,best practice" is needed.

Such a conception of both is the ,,Critical Best Practice Approach" with the following definition: *,, The Critical Best Practice perspective can be defined as solution focused in that it attempts to be strategic in terms of identifying ways of working that offer positive resources to professionals in guiding their work , but in a manner that takes full account of issues of power, inequalities and constraint, as well as creativity in how skilful social intervention makes a difference."* (Fergueson 2006)

The definition includes the assumption that ,,best practice exists even in systems with poor outcome. The focus is here not longer on the mistakes but on what does get done well and on the positive outcomes of social work.

Further the Critical Best Practice constitutes a way of combining four dimensions: The first dimension is to identify the best practice that is going on, the next is to use the critical theory as an interpretative framework, further to take advantage of the evidence-based practice to produce scientifically robust data on what works and to include practice-based evidence (Fergueson 2006).

But the Critical Best Practice is more then just evidence best practice. It is a broadened

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concept of it. Evidence-based practice emphasis on quantitative, statistical measurement and sometimes undermines qualitative issues like the aspects of human agency. In the Critical Best Practice approach is the need of qualitative research methods as well as the experience of the professionals and service users and the production of practice-based evidence necessary.

If you want to get these all you have to ask the practice. I did that and in my following points I will demonstrate it.

B. Practical part: Critical Best Practice approach- Example: service- centre for elderly people

1. The ,,Munich-model" of service-centres for elderly people

The service- centres for elderly people in Munich are part of a special ,,Munich-model", because there exist over 30 service-centres all over Munich. So they cover almost every district of Munich and they are aligned to individual needs of the elderly people in the single parts of the town. That is unique in Germany.
They are financed by the city Munich but they are managed by the different welfare organisation themself. The concept of this ,,Model" is also designed by the city Munich. The task of the centres are consultation, support, information, to offer courses and groups, it should constitute a meeting place and should include forms of participation for the elderly people. Three social worker are employed in every centre (Konzeption der Alten- und Servicezentren 2006).

2. Best-practice interview

I did my best-practice interview in one of those centres. The main goal of them are to integrate the elderly people into the society and to prevent exclusion of them.
That is way my question to the social workers was: ,,What they ,,best-practice" is to reach this goal, what they do to achieve the inclusion of the elderly people into the society?"

They named me their computer courses. They decided to be a gate to the new media for the elderly people and reach through partakes on the actual developments in the society

inclusion into the society. The computer course was developed together with the elderly people and in the course of time they become even teacher of the courses. So they started as students and later became teachers. Most people who take one course also participate on following courses. In this way friendship and social networks between the course participates have arisen. In the last eight years over 1600 people have taken one of these courses. So it is very successful.

The social workers also told me that what makes the difference to other education institutions is that they support the elderly people when they come to the course for the first time. The social workers try to help them with the integration into the group because nobody should be excluded.

3. Confrontation of the best-practice with the view of the science

In a next step I confronted my results of the interview with existing literature about the topic. For this reason I had defined a ,,risk-groups" for exclusion first, especially what feature this group has in common.

I find out that there is a very high risk of exclusion of the society for people with the following feature: People with low income and education, female persons, people with a background of migration, very old persons and without an working social network (ISG 2005).

Further I discovered with the help of a study about education that people who join such kind of courses can be described as high educated, with high income and existing social network (Infas-Institut 2005).

So I had the features of people who are endangered to be excluded of the society and the features of people who usually join such courses. After that I confronted both with each other.

As I confronted both it was obvious that they are the opposite of each other.

So my conclusion is that people who are usually participate education programs are already integrated into the society and they have social networks. People of the ,,risk-group" are not the main participants of such courses.

That means for the best practice of the service-centre that they tried to integrated people who are already integrated which makes they work is easy because they goal is already reached before the measure have started.

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They fail the right main targeted to fulfil their main goal.

It is especially a shame because the centre have no financial pressure because the city Munich pay them lump sums. Like this they should fulfil their tasks without financial problems.

The social worker here reached the goal but with the wrong clients because the right clients would not join such measures and it would be much more difficult to reach the aim with them. That for creative methods would be asked for.

C. Conclusion

I think that is a good example how the Critical Best Practice approach could be used. In a first step I asked the practice of social work what is they best-practice in that special case, then I compared it with the view of the science and evidence-based data. So I reflected the practice critically and came to a conclusion.

In my example the best-practice turned out to be failed because they focused on the wrong main clients. The success of the project covered that. The Critical Best Practice approach could help to discover such mistakes but also to discover the good things. The last point is the important one. It could be one possibility to solve the problem of the missing literature of good practice in social work.

Literature:

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