

# Book Review

Shaw, I. F. (2012). *Practice and Research*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co.

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Ian F. Shaw, Ph.D., is professor of social work at the University of York, UK. He spent 5 years as a probation officer before joining the faculty of York in 2003. He has devoted much of his career to addressing practice evaluation and the intersection of practice and research. He has published extensively in the areas of qualitative research and practice evaluation. Shaw is editor of *Qualitative Social Work* and serves as programme chair of the European Conference for Social Work Research. He has been a major voice for practitioner research and hearing client voices.

*Practice and Research* is a compendium of some of Shaw's publications in practice evaluation and qualitative research. Overall, the book is an argument for more rigorous social work research using qualitative methodology with more emphasis on practitioner research and more room for client voices. The book raises several significant issues with regard to the methodology of social work research and the impact of research on social work practice. Because it is a compendium, each part and each chapter to some extent stands on its own. The book consists of five parts with an extensive introduction. The introduction discusses Shaw's career development and how he came to see the importance of method. His initial education was in sociology. He stresses the importance of sociology and sociological inquiry in shaping his career and his approach to social work. He states, "Over the years it has been the doing of, and the reflection on, inquiry that has given me

whatever purchase I may have on social work practice, sociology, social policy, and so on" (p.4). The introduction sets the tone of the book, which is the importance of sociology for social work, evaluation, qualitative research, the relationship of research and theory to practice, and the importance of hearing client voices.

Part I, "Perspectives on social work research," establishes the base for the rest of the book. Chapter 1 argues that social work research should contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practice and services, enhance social work's moral purpose, strengthen social work's disciplinary character and location, and promote inquiry marked by rigor, range, variety, depth, and progression (p.35). Chapter 2 explores what is distinctive about social work research. The author argues that the more important question is "...what might make social work research distinctively good?" (p. 48). He proposes six benchmarks of good research: rigor, range, variety, depth and progression, active conversation with the social science community, consistency with broader social work purposes, attention to aspects of the research enterprise that are close to social work, and taking seriously aspects of the research mission that seem on the face of it far from social work. Chapter 3 briefly reviews various approaches to knowledge currently used in social work. The thrust of the chapter is that we must be skeptical, but act. Chapter 4 argues that social work and sociology began closely connected and

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we need to reestablish that connection. Chapter 5 is a tribute to William J. Reid. It emphasizes his skepticism with regard to the empirical practice movement.

Part II, "Evaluation," seeks to present perspectives and issues in evaluating social work practice. The author seeks to "...jolt the social work community out of what I fear may be an unduly complacent alignment to this or that set of standpoints" (p.95). Chapter 6 summarizes much of the work on evidence-based practice (EBP) then critiques this approach. The author seeks to add evaluation that looks for understanding and justice, not just evidence. Chapter 7 further develops the contrasts between EBP and qualitative approaches. It discusses three approaches: realist post-positivism, critical evaluation, and constructivism. The author argues for less precision and more relevance. Chapter 8 argues that social work evaluation is political. It addresses many of the issues involved in emancipatory and socially relevant research. The author suggests that we must be self-reflexive and avoid myth-building. He argues that qualitative methodology offers the opportunity to develop evaluation in practice. Chapter 9 provides an integration of evaluation methodology and learning organizations' thinking. It proposes practitioner research as a possible approach to integrate the two.

Part III, "Qualitative Research," discusses the author's view of the strengths and concerns in qualitative research strategies. Chapter 10 is a broad defense of qualitative methodology in social work practice and evaluation. Chapter 11 argues for researching outcomes and effects in a context of finding out how information is used in developing programs and services. Again practitioner research is stressed. Chapter 12 addresses several important ethical issues, encouraging researchers to be aware of social obligations and the importance of personal ethics in conducting research. Chapter 13 addresses "causal accounts" in a discussion of the accounts

social workers give of their cases. It argues for an ethnographic approach with the inclusion of client voices or accounts. Chapter 14 discusses the "consequences of qualitative social work research." It argues that evaluators have put too much faith in quantification and paid too little attention to judgment. The chapter argues for more emphasis on understanding the implications of evaluation. It supports better understanding of the role research can and should play in practice. Chapter 15 deals with using qualitative methods to understand children and young people. It argues that we need to develop better understanding of children's culture and how they approach life.

Part IV, "Research, theory and practice," addresses the connections between research and theorizing and practice. Chapter 16 provides examples of qualitative evaluation in social services. It argues that consumers and practitioners should have more voice in developing quality control methods and research. Chapter 17 claims that evaluation should take practicing social workers' accounts of what they do seriously. Chapter 18 expands the argument for practitioner evaluation and for contextualizing evaluation research in practice. Chapter 19 presents six rules for developing good practice:

1. Critical reflection on practice.
2. Practitioners must "...know what they know."
3. "Practitioners must begin with the knowledge that service users and carers bring to them."
4. Practitioners need to exploit the analogy between research and practice methods.
5. Evaluation needs to be team- and colleague-based.
6. Evaluation needs to involve service users.

Chapter 20 asserts that evaluation and practice need to be more aware of other cultures.

Part V, “Service users and research,” discusses issues in weighting different types of knowledge. Quality criteria are contingent on local context, and research needs to be both emancipatory and rigorous. The chapters in this part all develop these ideas with an emphasis on including the voice of the service user. It encourages the development of small-scale practitioner and consumer research.

The book raises a number of important issues in evaluation, research, and theorizing, and their relationship to practice. It is very dense, and each chapter stands on its own as well as contributing to the overall argument. The book will be useful to serious researchers who are concerned with how social work knowledge should be developed and how to balance practice wisdom with scientific findings.