

This I Believe: Examining the Construction of Truth, Belief, and Reason

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Abstract: There are several advantages to epistemological and personal exploration in social work research, education, and practice. This reflection is especially important in qualitative social work research where social inquiry may be shaped by assumptions about the process of knowing and, therefore, has the potential to impact the interpretation of events. Students may struggle to resonate with the complex and abstract concepts associated with epistemology, and there is a paucity of literature regarding the experiences of developing insight into this topic and its personal and professional implications. Drawing on personal experiences, I reflect on the experience and importance of epistemological exploration, a lifetime project for those in the helping professions.

Keywords: epistemology, epistemological exploration, personal beliefs, critical reflection, self-reflection, social work, constructivism

Introduction

There has long been debate regarding the relevance of epistemology in professional programs including social work (Aymer & Okitikpi, 2000). Many agree that social work students should be provided with opportunities to develop their understanding of epistemology and the implications of personal beliefs and values, and most social work curricula at graduate levels include an examination of epistemological underpinnings (Marra & Palmer, 2008); however, students may struggle to resonate with complex and novel concepts concerning epistemology, and contemporary literature is largely void of the implications of these considerations from a personal perspective. In an attempt to advance this area of inquiry, this paper discusses the development of an understanding of the importance of personal and epistemological reflection in social work practice and outlines implications for consumers/clients, students, and practitioners. The first section describes the underpinnings of epistemology and postmodern theories. The latter half of the paper uses a first-person narrative to outline the relevance of this in practice.

Epistemological Underpinnings

Epistemology, which concerns the study of knowledge and the sources of knowledge, is relevant to many helping professions as it reflects how the beliefs individuals hold regarding the certainty of knowledge, the process of knowing, and the justification of knowledge claims may have an impact on actions and behaviors (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra & Palmer, 2008). Specifically, epistemology is relevant to social work practice as skilled practitioners, who will be required to use critical thinking skills to inform conscious decision-making practices, should be able to understand how their own knowledge sources and beliefs may hold bias (Anderson-Meger, 2014; Gambrill & Gibbs, 2009). One way to achieve this understanding is through epistemological exploration, which allows students to explore where their own beliefs and

knowledge reside and, thus, develop a competency to critically evaluate information and resolve and coordinate theory and evidence (Hofer, 2004; Kuhn, 1991). Unfortunately, the importance of epistemological exploration and relevant implications are often overlooked and underappreciated by students who may struggle to resonate with concepts and material(s). This may disadvantage students who lack the opportunity to gain both personal and professional insight as well as consumers/clients who may benefit from a practitioner who has critically evaluated their own sources of knowledge and the implications of the beliefs they hold.

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism is relevant to epistemology, ontology, and the nature of perception, cognition, learning, and behaviors as it is based on the premise that individuals attach unique meanings to life experiences (Carpenter & Brownlee, 2017; Granvold, 2008). As such, realities are formulated individually or are co-constructed interpersonally (Granvold, 2008).

Philosophically, constructivism concerns the nature of reality and being and the nature and acquisition of human knowledge (Baerveldt, 2013; Carpenter & Brownlee, 2017). The constructionist view of epistemology acknowledges that knowledge occurs at both conscious and unconscious levels (Granvold, 2008). Thus, it becomes important to examine the unconscious processes whereby knowledge is constructed in order to avoid potential biases that may be the result of personal experience and constructed beliefs.

Constructivism is a relatively new conceptual framework for social work practice (Carpenter & Brownlee, 2017). The constructivist perspective suggests that knowledge is developed as interpretations of experience and emerges in historical contexts depending on human activity (Turner, 2017). Therefore, the knowledge and understanding that social workers (among others) possess is a result of the experiences they have encountered (Carpenter & Brownlee, 2017). Individuals, then, act accordingly based on the knowledge they have gained through these experiences.

Constructivism not only provides insight into the development of knowledge, but also provides an understanding of human behavior based on causality. Since the personal experiences we have had lead to our beliefs and are not necessarily an accurate representation of the truth and reality of others, the potential for bias must be acknowledged and accounted for.

Personal Experience with Epistemology and Postmodern Perspectives

The underpinnings of epistemology did not resonate with me until my first year of doctoral studies in social work when I was tasked with successfully grasping the key concepts and theories surrounding this topic. I had no prior experience with epistemology, and while I had considered some aspects of how my own personal beliefs and philosophies had the potential to bias my practice, I had never considered the foundational components of my beliefs, where my knowledge came from, or why this mattered.

Like many students, I found the subject of epistemology complex and confusing and I struggled

to see its direct relevance to practice. I struggled to resonate with abstract terms and, when I turned to the literature, it was difficult to find open and transparent discourse (for example, through personal narratives) from those navigating similar unfamiliar territory. Exploring aspects of constructivism, familiar territory for many social science researchers, helped to make sense of the importance of exploring these issues and the implications that this has on practitioners both personally and professionally. Constructivism helped me to comprehend how I came to understand what I believe to be true, how my reality and beliefs are subject to change, and how these beliefs and realities vary from one person to the next. While I had skilled professors who helped me better understand this topic, I realized there was a great paucity of literature as it concerns the real-life, raw evidence and experiences of how these factors influence practice and why it matters. I had hoped to find more information and insight from fellow students and practitioners who offered tangible examples of why this information was relevant in practice. The following section outlines how I was able to resonate with this topic through the integration of my own knowledge, sources of knowledge, and experiences in practice.

“This I Believe”: Personal Evidence of the Importance of Epistemological Exploration

This paper has discussed the constructivist view of human knowing using literature relevant to social work and epistemology. However, what is lacking in current literature is personal and reflective evidence of the importance for epistemological exploration and the value of consciousness of one’s personal epistemology. The following section will illustrate the importance of epistemological exploration using three personal examples (vignettes).

I Believe in Kindness

Research indicates that students’ beliefs and understanding often relate to their study domain (Hofer, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that my desire to become a member of the helping profession is deeply rooted in my upbringing and in the interactions I have shared with others. Like most youth, growing up I was exposed to various forms of bullying. Having witnessed numerous acts of aggression and injustice toward my peers, I grew to feel I had an obligation to advocate for those who were subject to unkindness. I remember experiencing strong feelings of sadness and a desire to make things better. These feelings instilled in me a desire to help others and, over time, I sought teachings and role models who valued acceptance, kindness, and non-judgment.

By university, I had decided to pursue a degree in social work where I hoped to ally with like-minded professionals who shared the beliefs I brought with me to the program. After completing a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, I accepted a job working with survivors of psychiatric deinstitutionalization. Had it not been for my personal experiences (and constructed reality) growing up, I may not have decided to pursue a career fighting social injustices. Before long, my reality was changed by experiences once again. After working as a front-line social worker, I began to see even more flaws in current systems and policies. This new reality—combined with my previously fostered drive to prevent injustice—led to a belief that pursuing a Doctoral degree and becoming a social science researcher would allow to me to

address the problems I'd identified.

My experiences witnessing acts of unkindness toward others encouraged me to pursue education that I felt would lead to change. My reality was shaped throughout my life and has led me to believe certain things and act in certain ways based on my personal experiences. Had working as a front-line social worker revealed that all systems were running smoothly and effectively, my reality would not have necessitated further action on my part. However, seeing these issues and having these experiences led me to make decisions that have greatly impacted the way I think, the way I perceive things, the knowledge I seek, and the way I interact with the world around me.

Knowing why and how I know what I know has allowed me to become critically aware that my reality is not the ultimate truth. Furthermore, I acknowledge that my reality may be privileged and is not an accurate portrayal of the way things truly are. Thus, relying on personal experience alone is not enough and if I am to be truly effective in my pursuit of kindness, I need to know why I believe in kindness in the first place.

I Believe “This Too Shall Pass”

Resilience has always been an interest of mine. I am constantly reminded and inspired by the way countries, people, and communities bounce back after tragedy. My belief that things get better stems from my own personal experience that no matter how bad things are, they will improve.

This notion became clearer to me in my twenties when I lost a dear friend. I did not think things would ever get better. It was an unimaginable loss that, at the time, I could not imagine ever recovering from. I recall people telling me that things would improve, but despite their well-wishes, I did not feel better. I experienced feelings of grief that I had never felt before and pain beyond measure. It took years, but over time, my wounds healed and I was able to move on in ways I never thought possible. Knowing that I was able to overcome such a tragedy strengthened and empowered me, giving me a new appreciation of my time with others. I believe having this experience not only instilled in me a desire to help others during their time of suffering, but led me to believe that even though it may not seem so at the time, things do get better.

The belief that things do improve may seem harmless and its epistemological basis trivial, but it is important to examine the implications of this seemingly simple belief. Just because I was able to surmount this tragedy does not mean that others will have the same experience. For some, the pain and suffering may never truly pass; for others, the pain may even worsen. Thus, my reality is not shared by everyone. By not examining the origins and implications of this belief, I might have become an impatient and discouraging social work practitioner who could not understand why people were not adhering to my belief that “this too shall pass.” Not only would this be insensitive, it would be ethically irresponsible. Thus, knowing why I hold that belief and where this knowledge came from allows me to act sensibly and consciously when working with others who have experienced a similar loss.

I Believe Knowledge is Power

I was raised in a single-parent home. My mother, a highly educated and successful woman, raised my brother and me amid busy work schedules and appointments all on her own. While other children of single mothers struggled financially, my brother and I never went without. I began to attribute our privileged circumstances not only to my mother's dedication to her career and to her family, but also to the knowledge and education she pursued that allowed her to obtain a job that provided for us. My mother instilled in me a desire to accumulate as much education as possible; I believe that without this influence, I would not be where I am today.

While I was fortunate enough to have this experience growing up, I am well aware that this is not the reality for most single-parent families. Thus, my reality could be described as privileged and is notably a construction based on personal experiences. Examining the epistemological underpinnings of my belief in knowledge is both important and humbling. Without examining why I hold this belief, I risk making decisions that are based on my reality and personal experience alone. This would not only be erroneous but incongruent with social work values and ethics.

I am aware that education is a privilege that not everyone has, and I remind myself of this daily. The fact that I am able to attend university and learn from brilliant minds that have both knowledge and practice wisdom to share is a privilege that I do not take lightly. I see education as a provider of the skills I need to critically reflect on information that is presented to me and also as a means to facilitate changes that will help others.

Future Implications

From a constructivist perspective, it is evident that the experiences outlined above greatly impact my current beliefs and practices both personally and professionally. With these beliefs impacting decision-making processes, it is clear that social workers have an ethical obligation to examine their personal beliefs in order to provide evidence-based practices and avoid potential biases and assumptions. Epistemological exploration has many implications for social workers, and I believe it is crucial that epistemology is a subject explored by students who may be tasked with making decisions that will affect others who will most certainly have experiences that differ from their own. Knowing that realities are constructed and that people develop knowledge based on their personal experiences has important practice implications. For example, students who are aware of their personal epistemology will be able to better understand that concepts and ideas that seem real and justifiable to them may not apply to a wider population (Aymer & Okitikpi, 2000). This leads to compassion, understanding, and acknowledgement that multiple realities exist and that realities are often fluid. Additionally, as students explore their epistemological basis, they learn about themselves on personal and professional levels. Thus, epistemology offers insights into personal beliefs and values and fosters intellectual and personal growth in students (Hofer, 2004).

This paper attempted to accentuate the value of consciousness of personal epistemology in social work. As evidenced throughout this paper, future research should aim to promote the personal

and critical reflection of social work students. As this paper has done, works should encourage students to explore their personal epistemologies and relate them to their professional experience. Although recent research has provided valuable insights into the importance of epistemology, little literature exists that demonstrates the intersection of personal beliefs and their direct relationship to practice.

Conclusion

Epistemology may be thought of as an issue better suited for philosophers than social workers; however, with the many implications for practice, it is important that students are encouraged to examine the epistemologies that guide their practice actions (Dean & Fenby, 1989). While current research has identified the benefit of epistemological discussion in pedagogy, little has been done to demonstrate the intersection of personal experiences and their impact on belief and practice. Personal and epistemological exploration not only allows social workers to avoid potential biases related to their personal epistemologies, but also facilitates an understanding of client narratives and the construction of knowledge (Siegel, 1989). Social work students may need help developing their theoretical orientation, a lifelong project, and exploring these issues and connecting beliefs and truths to experiences may facilitate this understanding and lead to better outcomes for consumers/clients and practitioners.

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