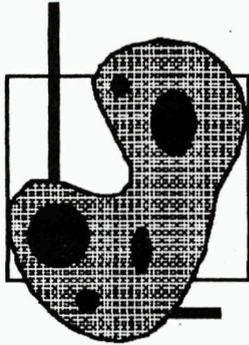


FROM STORY TO POLICY?

By Sonia Leib Abels



A prominent theme of the past week's news (7/2/95) was the connection between personal experience and public policy. Daniel Schor, NPR's (National Public Radio) leading news analyzer explored this relationship using Texas' Governor George Bush and South Carolina's Senator Jesse Helms. Bush decided to eliminate treatment programs for drugs because he had stopped drinking without anyone's help by will power alone. If he could do it everyone else could, hence, no need for treatment programs. Bush's values of self reliance and use of economic resources appear to have informed his decision. Jesse Helms proposed to use the money from AIDS research, because of the "disgusting, abnormal things they do" to invest in heart research. Helms values on Gays and Lesbians and his heart trouble factored that decision. Schor linked Bush's and Helms' policy

decisions to their personal experiences. He wrapped this up with "they ought to give science a chance." Meaning their decisions ought to be informed by empirical findings.

Practitioners in professional education are taught and expected to use research knowledge as the basis for practice decisions; certainly different than the personal and political values used by Bush and Helms. But not quite.

Aaron Rosen's (1994) scholarly investigation of knowledge used by practitioners demonstrated that "Value based assertions were the most frequently used-rational to inform clinical or direct practice." (p.568) Initially the investigators found it puzzling that "only a negligible use of personal experiences" (p.571) served as the base for practice decisions. Rosen explained this result as an artifact of his research design. There was a six week training program Systematic Planned Practice (SPP) for workers that focused on concepts and procedure "where the importance of good supporting rational for all treatment decisions were stressed and theory and empirical evidence were viewed as preferred when available, to reliance on personal experiences only." (p. 571). In his view this emphasis discouraged workers from using their own experiences.

Katherine Dunlap's (1993) history of research in social work

education (1915-1991) optimistically noted that there was emerging evidence (scholarly writings) that practitioners did use knowledge based reasoning. She summarized the research with a set of significant recommendations for "radical" change in the research curriculum and in the teaching of research. In this editors view the recommendations contradict the optimism and tend to support Rosen's findings.

There is cumulative evidence that the preparation of professionals to use knowledge (research) to inform practice appears to be unsuccessful. The profession has a long history of calls and frequent reform efforts to integrate scientific research and practice. Dissatisfaction with the scientific paradigm and the professions inability to reach the objective of persuading helping professionals to use knowledge for decision making has strengthened interest in other perspectives. The voices of "Postmodernism," a paradigm for inquiry and ways of reasoning about practice, have multiplied and increased in volume.

Recently a dean of a school of social work said that the journal symbolized a paradigmatic shift. While it might be wonderful to think so, I believe rather than a shift, which suggests displacement, it is a recognition that narrative inquiry is a parallel form of reasoning that can strengthen the

integration between practice and science. Bruner (1986) claims there are two fundamental modes of reasoning "each providing distinct ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two though complimentary are irreducible to one another." The narrative process examines connections between events over time, and formal science and logic seek generalizable truth as best as it can be known. Each approach has its own operating principles and differ significantly in methodology and procedures for verification. Narratives began with the beginning of human life and relationships; the scientific method came much later.

Imre's (1995) article on Postmodernism (in this issue) states the scientific mode in human services shuts out narrative modes of reasoning and reduces the professional's ability to engage in narrative inquiry.

Rosen, as noted earlier, suggested that practitioners in his study did not use their own personal practice experience as a guide to decisions because of the training program (SPP) and an awareness of the researchers expectations. The same explanation may account for the reasons social workers in general do not use their own practice experience to guide decisions. Narrative inquiry, which would contribute to knowledge based reasoning, is not a central approach used within the research curriculum. Historically (with some exceptions) practice experiences are considered inappropriate modes of

reasoning, and outside the realm of professional knowledge. Much of the research attention has been on development of knowledge to understand and explain human behavior: (such as doctoral dissertations, and masters thesis). Many submissions to this journal focus on understanding and explaining human behavior. This fits social work's overemphasis on assessment.

If we accept the significance of narratives in the construction of human experience; and consider the natural affinity between narrative reasoning and social work practice; then the discipline of narrative inquiry ought to become a central part of professional education. It may be the means to achieve the integration of research and practice. □

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