

Summary

Knowledge review 3: Types and quality of knowledge in social care

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In this exciting and original review, the authors ask: where does knowledge come from, who does it belong to, and how do we judge its value?

All of these questions are basic to how SCIE looks at 'knowledge'. The move towards involving service users in services demands equal respect for the evidence they provide about social care. The same applies to social care workers: their experience and knowledge – gained in the front line – have been overlooked too often in the past. SCIE has been searching for a way of including all these kinds of knowledge, and this review is the first stage.

- The Review Team was drawn from a range of backgrounds. They took nothing for granted. They read, thought, tested and consulted in the search for simple tools for identifying knowledge of real value – to the public and to professionals.
- The first stage involved thinking about the best way of breaking down existing knowledge into types or categories. There are several methods they could have chosen – a breakdown based on the purpose of the knowledge, for example.
- After trying out some methods, they opted for a breakdown based on the source of the knowledge, that is, where does the report come from? A service user or carer, a social worker, a researcher? Their table of five 'sources' is on page 5.
- Their 'source-based' guide to kinds of knowledge in social care starts from the idea that all types of knowledge deserve equal respect and attention.

But this does not, of course, mean that all knowledge is equally 'good' or useful. Wherever it comes from, it may be badly collected or recorded, make unjustified claims or ignore evidence from other sources. How can we be sure that we are providing knowledge of a quality which everyone can trust? The Review Team's next task was to find ways of assessing the quality of knowledge.

- They looked first for the kinds of quality standards that all types of social care knowledge should meet. Some of these are the common-sense tests which we all apply to any kind of information: can you understand it? Do you know where it's coming from? They came up with six basic tests that all knowledge has to pass, to be of value.
- Next, they looked at whether each type of knowledge is currently judged against specific standards. The quality of research, for example, is already judged against a set of rules. These 'source-specific' standards are summarised in the table below.
- The Team concluded that the first question to be asked of any piece of knowledge is, 'Is it TAPUPAS?'

- > Transparency – are the reasons for it clear?
- > Accuracy – is it honestly based on relevant evidence?
- > Purposivity – is the method used suitable for the aims of the work?
- > Utility – does it provide answers to the questions it set?
- > Propriety – is it legal and ethical?
- > Accessibility – can you understand it?
- > Specificity – does it meet the quality standards already used for this type of knowledge?

This framework is just a beginning. It doesn't tell you what knowledge is good, but helps you identify weaknesses. And while working on it, the Team made a number of discoveries. They found, for example, that standards for each 'source' are being enriched by learning from the continuing development of others. The principle of participation found in user knowledge has spread to research and organisational knowledge. Some of the research knowledge rules are being applied to other types.

In the end, the review asks basic questions about what evidence means. It has often been taken to mean research evidence – but this is not the only sort, and the review says so. Policy makers, organisations which deliver services, users and carers and practitioners are all going to have their say.

Introduction

The basis of SCIE's work is summed up as 'better knowledge for better practice'. But recognising the 'best' among the huge body of knowledge that has grown up around social care is no simple matter. The purpose of this two-stage project was to identify the main types of research, experience and wisdom that combine to form the social care knowledge base; and to go on from that to propose a framework for assessing the quality of knowledge of any type.

Classifying knowledge in social care

The field of social care knowledge is particularly broad and diverse. The Review Team, confronted with this landscape, agreed with SCIE the principles which should form the basis of their analysis:

- The classification should be comprehensive, clear and easy to use. One of its functions was to underpin further development of the electronic Library of Social Care (eLSC). The key was to come up with definitions of types that were precise as well as straightforward, inclusive and accessible.
- The classification should be 'intellectually defensible' – that is, arrived at by a method that was clear, systematic, transparent and tested. It should be able to draw together and distinguish between every known kind of social care knowledge, without excluding or giving preference to any one type.

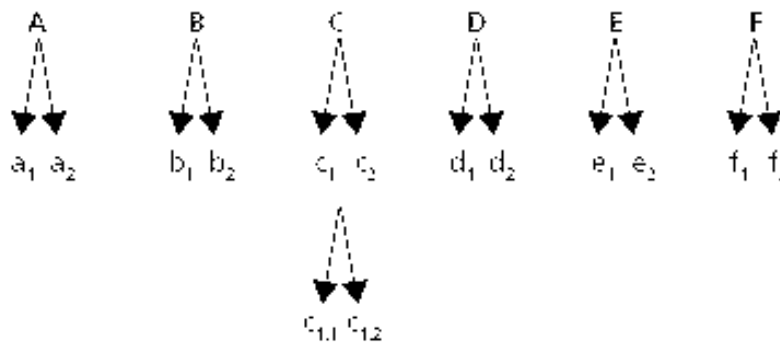
- It should provide a compass for the people using it, and direct them to appropriate knowledge for their specific social care function or information need. While all types of knowledge should be covered by the classification, it should enable the users to choose the knowledge that would be of most use to them in their particular circumstances.
- Importantly, through SCIE, the proposed classification should send out the message that all knowledge sources have a vital role to play in building up the social care evidence base. The classification should not imply a hierarchy. It should not neglect sources of knowledge that are informal or implicit, currently lack prestige or seem less convincing.

The initial overview

A first trawl through the relevant literature produced a list of over a dozen knowledge forms, each with its own methods, standards and tradition. The next task was to outline some general principles of classification: A classification system takes a body of knowledge and breaks it down into the most important or obvious types –

A B C D E F

Each type may then break into two or more strands, and each strand split into more sub-strands – like roots spreading out from a single stem:



This kind of 'roots' classification was chosen by the Review Team because it can describe a complex field clearly, and because it lends itself to electronic storage and retrieval.

Comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of existing classifications failed to find any one which covered the whole field of social care knowledge, but two were identified – 'purpose-based' and 'source-based' – which had the potential to be extended and adapted.

Consultation on the project's findings with a range of stakeholders was held at every stage. As the Team began to close in on a potential classification, the options were presented to a group of 19 members of the service user community. The main messages were:

- the future of social care knowledge must be far more responsive to, and reflective of service users' views;
- all research strategies, regardless of origin, should be judged by the same standards or criteria; and
- the quality standards applied to user-controlled research should be used for all research strategies which generate knowledge in the social care field.

The classification

The final selection between a purpose- or source-based classification was made by applying both to a selection of 50 recent social care papers. The Review Team concluded that the source-based approach was able to cover all forms of social care knowledge. It also had the advantage of presenting each form on equal terms to the rest. While being clearer and simpler to use than the alternative method, it also allowed for growing complication (at the level of the 'sub-roots' shown above).

The five categories chosen for the recommended breakdown are:

Source 1	Source 2	Source 3	Source 4	Source 5
Organisational	Practitioner	Policy community	Research	User and carer
Knowledge gained from organising social care	Knowledge gained from doing social care	Knowledge gained from wider policy context	Knowledge gathered systematically with a planned design	Knowledge gained from experience of and reflection on service use

A framework for quality assessment

The second stage of the project focused on the search for a framework that would cover all these widely differing sources of knowledge, and develop methods for assessing quality that were relevant to each specific source.

The search began with the development of six standards that should apply to knowledge from whatever source. These are intended to clear the ground and provide a solid foundation for source-specific standards.

They are as follows.

1. Transparency

Principle: the process of developing knowledge should make plain how it was generated; clarify aims, objectives and all the steps of the subsequent argument; and give readers access to a common understanding of the underlying reasons for it.

Examples

- A record of the case notes of a mental health practitioner – does it give the reasons behind a recommended course of action?
- A qualitative research report on adoption – does it give full details of how the study was conducted, who was involved and what techniques were used in the analysis?

2. Accuracy

Principle: all knowledge claims should be supported by and faithful to the events, experiences, informants and sources used in their production. For knowledge to meet this standard, it should demonstrate that all assertions, conclusions, and recommendations are based on relevant and appropriate information.

Examples

- A group produces a report that purports to convey users' experiences of home care services – are the users' perspectives merely asserted, or is their voice clearly reported in the data and reflected in the analysis?
- A policy document is produced that claims to be a comprehensive review of existing legislation on adoption – is the coverage and analysis of previous legislation selective or all-inclusive?

3. Purposivity

Principle: the approaches and methods used to gain knowledge should be appropriate to the task in hand, or 'fit for purpose'. For knowledge to meet this standard, it should demonstrate that the inquiry has followed a suitable approach to meet the stated objectives of the exercise.

Examples

- A local authority publishes a strategy that claims to measure changes in takeup resulting from a new residential care services regime – is an audit using standardised participation indicators applied before and after the change more appropriate than a satisfaction survey or practitioner case notes?
- A policy development team commissions a report to improve the implementation details of community sentencing – would a process evaluation fit the bill more readily than an academic 'think piece' or an inspection report?

4. Utility

Principle: knowledge should be appropriate to the decision setting in which it is intended to be used, and to the information need expressed by the seeker after knowledge. For knowledge to meet this standard it should be 'fit for use', providing answers that are as closely matched as possible to the question.

Examples

- Practitioners are looking for knowledge on how to help first-generation immigrant families suffering from alcohol-related problems – do they need to consider just the disorder or should they also call on information sensitive to the background, history, culture and context of the clients?
- A senior child care manager is considering the balance between residential and community-based services over the next decade – would a Green/White Paper or the report of an influential think tank be more useful than the results of Best Value reviews or the results of user surveys?

5. Propriety

Principle: knowledge should be created and managed legally, ethically and with care for all relevant stakeholders. For knowledge to meet this standard, it should present adequate evidence, appropriate to each point of contact, of the informed consent of relevant stakeholders.

Examples

- A carer's group shares information about members with other organisations – has there been consent from all the members concerned?
- A government department consults regularly with the same community – has it considered or used results from previous exercises, and can this be demonstrated?

6. Accessibility

Principle: knowledge should be presented in a way that meets the needs of the knowledge seeker. To meet this standard, no potential user should be excluded because of the style used.

Examples

- A research team produces a report on autism aimed at parents – is it too long, too dense and does it use too much technical language? Is it so patronising as to be insulting?
- The Department of Health produces guidelines on charging for the residential care of elderly people – are they clear and comprehensive or ambiguous and selective?

Specific standards for specific types of knowledge

General standards like these are important, but not enough. Each piece of knowledge also has to meet the standards operating in its own field. These standards were compared in terms of the following questions:

- What is covered by the standards?
- What is the origin of the standards?
- What is the nature of the standards?
- How are the standards activated?
- What is their use and impact?

Standards: the current state of play

	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3	Source 4	Source 5
	Organisational knowledge	Practitioner knowledge	Policy community knowledge	Research knowledge	User and carer knowledge
What do they cover?	All social care activities	Very little	Very little	All kinds of social research	Very little
Nature	Rules, regulations, codes of practice, statutory and recommended guidance	Hidden, but basic to the process of practitioner decision making	Just beginning Markers of good practice rather than formal standards	Many sets of methodological rules	Just beginning Rooted in demands for accountability and participation
Origin	Inside organisations, at national, regional and local level Increasing external involvement through consultation processes	Developed from analysis of reflective practice by researchers working with practitioners; and from qualitative research standards	Inside organisations at present but, potentially, also from think tanks, political parties, public policy scholars	Inside research Involvement of government departments and agencies is growing	Could develop in many ways: through user/carer bodies research, policy community, or government
Started by	Statutory implementation, inspection and audit	Unknown	Unknown	Internal self-regulation; recent introduction of external monitoring and inspection	Unknown
Use and impact	Use imposed by statute	Unknown	Unknown	Routinely used, implementation sometimes weak, impact largely unknown	Unknown

The Review Team examined each type of knowledge (using their source-based classification) and considered the standards already operating against these five questions. Detailed results for each source are spelled out in the full report.

Conclusion

Apart from the detailed conclusions, general lessons from the study are that:

- The first question to ask about each piece of knowledge is, 'Is it TAPUPAS?!' – that is, does it meet all the generic standards identified here, as well as the standards set for its own particular type of knowledge?
- Each kind of knowledge source can and should learn from standards used in the others.
- No standards framework replaces judgements about quality.

The Review considers questions about:

- Who determines what research is undertaken?
- What value is placed on personal experience?
- Whose view counts about the really important outcomes?

These are all issues on which SCIE intends to break new ground. This Review has started the ball rolling...

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Braille, tape and large print versions of this summary can be made available on request.

A full version of the knowledge review is available on the SCIE website and in print from SCIE.