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Weblinks for Resources

Weblink 5.1 Designing for needs assessment and evaluations

Needs Assessment

Need has been a captivating concept in the professionalising discourses of health and welfare ‘experts’. It has also been widely appropriated in discourses of social justice. Viewed from a perspective influenced by positivist ways of thinking, needs take on an objective reality that is open to measurement; and consequently, ‘need assessment is seen as essentially a technical exercise in methodology – measuring something which is already “there”’ (Ife, 2002: 62). From a contrasting perspective, one might say ‘it is much more appropriate to think about needs statements rather than about needs per se, as needs only emerge from the act of definition’ (Ife, 2002: 258).

Mindful of research as a process of knowledge making, which occurs through certain paradigms and their associated methodologies, the reflexive researcher is much more likely to recognise the defining of need as a political and ideological act. As Ife (2002) puts it:

When one examines needs statements, it is clear that, while they contain a technical element, they are basically value judgements; they reflect views of rights, social justice and what it means to be truly human. The important question, therefore, is who actually defines need, making the judgement that something is ‘needed’. (p. 258)

This is a cautionary note for us when often it appears that a ‘need’ is almost self-evident, and the (moral) imperative for it to be addressed is unequivocal. Even setting a research agenda around ‘needs’ risks contributing to a politicising of social issues that accentuates ‘weaknesses’ rather than ‘strengths’. As we approach the assessment of need (or the construction of need statements), it is

important that we maintain an awareness that this is a highly charged exercise and one which accentuates the potential for research to be party to both oppressive and emancipatory practices (Oliver, 1992).

Marlow (2011), following Royse and Thyer (1996), outlines five different reasons for conducting needs assessments:

1. To determine whether services exist in the community.
2. To determine whether there are enough clients.
3. To determine who uses existing services.
4. To determine what barriers prevent clients from accessing services.
5. To document the existence of an ongoing social problem. (p. 75)

This list is useful but does concentrate on the role that needs assessment can play in developing 'services for clients'. It is cast very much in service-oriented terms. A broader more community-based approach is discernible in the suggestions by Alston and Bowles (2012: 156). They include the following:

- to empower the community to seek action by providing a 'snapshot' of the community's needs;
- to allow us to advocate for change and provide information about gaps in services;
- to identify and mobilise community resources.

Packham (2000: 112) provides examples where a participatory 'community auditing' approach has been adopted in the identification of needs of young people in north west England:

- Identifying ways of improving a service. An audit was carried out by 'New Deal' participants to inform a further education college 'of the views and needs of prospective New Deal clients' to enable the college to plan appropriately.
- Confirming hunches. Young people 'dropping in' to a city centre project audited the need and appropriateness of counselling services for young homeless people which 'confirmed a need we had previously suspected existed' (project co-ordinator).
- Identifying needs. Youth and community workers were employed to carry out an audit with 'excluded' young people in a 'Single Regeneration Area' in Manchester to help set a realistic qualitative baseline from which to target resources and measure change. Five hundred young people were involved in a range of agency and detached settings, using focus groups, audit teams, drama, art, video and residential methods.

The questions that Marlow (2011: 77-8) poses for deciding on the type of design suitable for a needs assessment are:

1. Whose need is being assessed?
2. Who will have input into the design of the needs assessment?
3. When will the needs assessment be carried out?
4. What type of understanding of need is required?
5. What level of description is useful?

These questions align with the key decisions framework of Sim and Wright (2000), discussed in Chapter 5. They again prompt us to think about the research strategy ('level of description'); and, generally, needs assessments will be of an exploratory or descriptive nature. They ask from whom data will be generated, what kind of data ('type of understanding'), and at what points in time. Additionally, the questions ask us to consider to what extent participants in the research, those whose needs are to be 'assessed', will be involved in planning and carrying it out.

In exploratory needs assessments, the design will want to allow for a depth of understanding to be developed. Since social work is often one of the first 'on the scene' of social issues that are arising through changing contexts, or being subjugated in existing ones, there is opportunity for the profession to be active in constructing needs statements about newly emerging or previously hidden topics of concern.

Frequently, this will involve documenting lived experiences and using research to assist in giving voice to the unheard, refugees and people seeking asylum, for example. Almost by definition, this will be research in sensitive and high risk areas that require careful consideration of the ethical issues involved (Lee, 1993). Inquiring into experiences and meanings, the research would be generating qualitative data. The numbers of participants involved is likely to be small, though of course the volume of data generated with them may well be extremely large. In exploratory fashion, the design itself will be non-experimental and loosely structured, enabling the researcher to be responsive to the interests and themes that are encountered along the way.

Descriptive needs assessments can also adopt a qualitative methodology. In this instance, however, there will be prior knowledge which informs a more detailed and structured design than is the case with exploratory studies. Commonly, descriptive studies combine quantitative and qualitative data. Clearly, this will depend on the purpose of the study and the way the research question has been developed. Whilst qualitative data can be analysed for an in-depth understanding of the topic, quantitative data might be sought for the breadth it can bring through its potential to provide generalisations (Sim and Wright, 2000; Oakley, 1999)

Descriptive studies that take this quantitative approach do not employ an experimental design as such. They are not testing a theory or involving

the planned introduction of a particular intervention. Nevertheless, they do require certain conditions and procedures to be met in order to achieve the stated criteria of reliability, validity, generalizability and objectivity. This does entail the researcher placing considerable controls over the way the study is conducted.

Evaluations

There are some commonly made distinctions about the foci for evaluation in social work. Firstly, evaluation can focus on the activities of practitioners ('practice' evaluation), or on a particular program of activity ('program' evaluation). Secondly, evaluation can examine what occurs between practitioners and others ('process' or 'formative' evaluation), or the consequences of that engagement ('outcome' or 'summative' evaluation). Combining these, there are four different foci for evaluation.

	Evaluating Practice	Evaluating Programs
Process Evaluation	Practice Process	Program Process
Outcome Evaluation	Practice Outcome	Program Outcome

Designs for process evaluation will tend to be exploratory or descriptive, and may be informed by either qualitative or quantitative methodologies. These studies might be concerned, for example, with investigating how service users experience a particular piece of practice or therapeutic regime; or, inquiring into the 'integrity' of a program (that is, the extent to which what goes on in the program is consistent with what the program claims to be doing). Outcome studies, seeking as they do to evaluate effectiveness in the impact of practice or program interventions, draw upon explanatory designs in order to examine causal links or associations between actions taken and the effect of those actions. Whilst the importance of evaluating social work outcomes has largely been accepted, the most credible and appropriate ways of going about this has become a highly contentious issue (Cheetham and Kazi, 1998).

The experimental approach, exhorted by advocates of evidence-based practice, has particular technical features. Sim and Wright (2000:88) suggest that an experiment 'can be defined as a longitudinal (prospective) design in which an intervention variable is manipulated in order to determine quantitatively its effect on one or more outcome variables, other extraneous variables having been controlled for'. To have 'internal validity' as an experiment, the design

has to build in as far as possible certain key features (Marlow, 2011; Sim and Wright, 2000). These include:

- The use of comparison groups (principally, the experimental group who receive the intervention and the control group who doesn't).
- Random allocation of participants to groups.
- Operationalisation of variables, whereby 'a concept is translated into its empirical referents' (Sim and Wright, 2000: 92).
- Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria in participant selection.
- Collecting data before the intervention (baseline measures) and at a predetermined time point(s) afterwards.
- 'Blinding', whereby the participant and / or researcher(s) are unaware who is receiving which intervention.

Experimental design is concerned not only to establish strong internal validity. There is also a concern with 'external validity'. Generalizability depends very much upon the sampling approach. It also depends upon the processes by which the comparison groups are composed to ensure any differences between them are non-systematic and how this 'equivalence' is then maintained through the experiment. For each of the threats to either internal or external validity, further sophistication can be built into a design in an attempt to minimise either their occurrence or their impact.

On the other hand, for practical and ethical reasons, an experiment may not be able to contain all the required features. Consequently, there are a range of designs referred to as 'pre-experimental' and 'quasi-experimental' in which one or more of the features of 'randomised controlled trials' (or RCTs, the experimental 'gold standard') are absent. Undertaking an experiment requires a high degree of control and manipulation of variables by the researcher. When this is either not feasible or desirable, the research might proceed, for example, without creating a separate control group or without randomly assigning participants to it ('quasi-experimental' as defined by Sim and Wright, 2000: 35); or, without the use of any form of control group ('pre-experimental'). Whilst some of these experimental design weaknesses can be ameliorated by the use of particular ('non-parametric', for instance) statistical techniques that control for external influences, they result in less confidence that the outcome is a consequence of the intervention (MacDonald et al, 1992).

There has been considerable interest in the use of 'single case' or 'single system' approximations to experimental design, particularly in regard to practice and the development of empirical practice approaches. Whilst a matter of continuing debate, single-system designs are generally taken to be no more than suggestive of the effectiveness of certain interventions rather than demonstrative of cause and effect mechanisms (MacDonald et al, 1992). Their perceived benefits have often been associated as much with the

explicitness and clarity they bring to practice, whilst serious questions remain about their feasibility in unpredictable and complex practice situations, their non-participatory form, and their tendency to ignore structural issues (Shaw, 2011).

With a focus on evaluating the outcomes of social work education, Carpenter (2005) offers a valuable appraisal regarding the definition of 'outcomes', a range of research designs, and a series of practical considerations. His discussion provides useful pointers on how to work with the issue of feasibility, accommodating experimental type designs to complex situations, and the issue of participation, seeking to engage the key constituencies in the research design and process.

Shaw (2011: 164) posits a choice between 'evidence-driven practice' and 'evaluating in practice'. Following Witkin (1992), he sees this as connected to fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of social work. For Shaw (2011: 164) 'evaluating in practice is not limited to determining whether social work is effective, but must include a transformative agenda' and 'challenges social work to new understandings and new methodology'.

Weblink 5.2 Examples of ethical codes and statements

From Australia

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/docs/ethics.pdf>
- National Health and Medical Research Council <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-ethics/australian-health-ethics-committee-ahec>

From UK

- Department of Health http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4005727

From USA

- The Hastings Center <http://www.thehastingscenter.org/>

International

- The Clinical Ethics Resource <http://clinicaethics.info/clinical-ethics-committees/international-examples-of-ethics-committees-and-hospital-requirements>
- Globethics.net <http://www.globethics.net/>
- World Health Organization http://www.who.int/rpc/research_ethics/erc/en/