

# THE KNOWLEDGE BASE OF A PROFESSION: THE CASE OF SOCIAL WORK

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**Abstract:** Journals are said to play an important role in the establishment of a knowledge base of a profession. Professions also use knowledge from other disciplines and are thereby interdisciplinary in character, using various ways of knowing. Using the social work profession as an example, empirical knowledge, as found in journals, was found to be only one source of knowledge in the profession's knowledge base. Social work as a profession also produces grey documents which are directly related to the social work experience. Grey documentation enables the dissemination of non-empirically based knowledge which is useful to the practicing professions. The use of both empirical knowledge via the journal and grey documentation requires an integrated approach in knowledge dissemination by archivists and information experts. The issue of prevailing attitudes of practitioners towards empirical knowledge and academicians towards grey documentation is raised. The role of the archivist and information expert as a facilitator in accepting knowledge as having a value in itself is proposed.

**Keywords:** Social work, journals, grey literature.

**Resumen:** Se afirma que las revistas desempeñan un papel importante para establecer la base de conocimientos de una profesión. Las profesiones utilizan también conocimientos procedentes de otras disciplinas y son, por tanto, de carácter interdisciplinar, al utilizar diversas formas de conocimiento. Tomando como ejemplo a los trabajadores sociales, el conocimiento empírico tal como aparece en las revistas resultó ser sólo una de sus fuentes de conocimiento. Esta profesión origina también literatura gris directamente relacionada con la experiencia en trabajos sociales. Dicha literatura gris permite la difusión de conocimientos sin base empírica, que son de utilidad para las profesiones aplicadas. El uso de conjunto del conocimiento empírico vía revistas y literatura gris requiere una integración por parte de archiveros y especialistas en información. Se plantea la cuestión de las actitudes de los profesionales prácticos frente al conocimiento empírico y de los académicos frente a la literatura gris. Se propone que el papel del archivero y del especialista en información consista en hacer que se acepte la información por su valor intrínseco.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajadores sociales, revistas, literatura gris.

Journals are said to play a fundamental role in the development of the knowledge base of disciplines and professions. Academic journals play a significant role in information dissemination and knowledge exchange (1), disseminating theory and research findings (2) and are indicators of scholarship (3). Journals also create

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a record of how well professions meet the requirement of possessing a body of knowledge (4). Scholarly journals are seen as a means of facilitating the growth and development of scientifically-based knowledge. Baker (5) in his analysis of a journal network structure found that it has implications for the advancement of knowledge within a field or profession.

## 1 Professions and Knowledge

Do professions have an independent body of knowledge which dominates their knowledge base and ways of «knowing»? Theology, law, and medicine, «the learned professions» for example, are interdisciplinary in character. Interdisciplinary knowledge was also a characteristic of American university education. It was only at the turn of the century that colleges and schools of liberal arts, which are the historic core of most American universities, departmentalized faculties of liberal arts and sciences. It was through this process that universities have recognized the autonomy of disciplines as separate branches of learning (6). Machlup differentiates between the interdisciplinary programs, a recent phenomenon in American university education, and professions. He says that interdepartmental programs as independent departments within American universities are often staffed with professors holding joint appointments in two departments. The interdepartmental program, such as Women's Studies, does not have the independent knowledge depth of a discipline. A profession according to Machlup has its own knowledge base. But in addition to knowledge specialization, professions integrate knowledge from other disciplines which are relevant in its need-to-know. Social work can be described as a profession (6) which is involved in this process.

## 2 Journals in the Social Work Profession

Similar to other professions, social work has a formal method of knowledge transfer that involves scholarly publications appearing in journals. An initial review of the literature would support the view that the social work profession has a core knowledge base found in journals. There has been an extensive analysis of social work journal articles demonstrating their contribution to the knowledge base of social work (7, 8, 9, 2, 10, 11, 1, 12). What is the journal knowledge base of the social work profession? Lindsey and Kirk (4) in their study on citations in social work journals report that the profession is served by several core journals that have consistently improved their contribution over the years. Baker (5) in a citation analysis of twenty social work journals identified what he called the core journals of the social work profession. These journals he states form the bases of a social work journal network. The journal *Social Work Research and Abstracts* lists what it defines as social work core journals.

There are researchers (13, 1) who warn us not to restrict the social work knowledge base to social work journals. Initially social work lacked its own knowledge base. Social work was therefore required to borrow its knowledge and methods from the social sciences in order to fill the empirical knowledge gap of

the profession (13). This has also been noted by Cheung (1) who writes: «Social work has used an interdisciplinary approach in some major work areas such as practice, research, education, treatment and administration. Social work has based its knowledge on other disciplines, enabling the application of information with supporting evidence that ensures the validity of its knowledge and builds firmly from its own base and framework». It was found that basic knowledge used in social work writing is not necessarily created by social workers, but by people in other fields such as psychiatry, psychology, sociology and social anthropology (14, 2, 15, 16, 12).

Kirk (17) tells us that the peer-reviewed journal plays two roles in social work which are related to social work as a practicing profession. The first is on the academic level. On this level the journal functions within the framework of an academic discipline. The journal is the established forum by which methods of inquiry, argument, and evidence are open to public scrutiny and critical review. The second role is on the practice level. On this level the journal answers the demands made on the profession to develop a credible and substantial applied knowledge base that can be transmitted to students and others who must address the problems confronting society.

In social work this dichotomy between social work as an academic discipline and a practicing profession is profoundly felt. Kirk (17) analyzed the relationship between scholarship and the professional school. He found that there is concern that the increased emphasis on research and scholarship in universities is threatening education for practice. But for the future of social work knowledge Kirk comes out on the side of empirical inquiry. He writes: «Only through the use of systematic and rigorous methods of critical inquiry—that is research—can theoretical or practical knowledge be developed and taught to students or shared with practitioners». Karger (15) analyzes this issue in terms of power relationships. Karger states that teaching of research in schools of social work is designed not only to create informed consumers, but also to develop a constituency of social workers who accept the scientific paradigm. Karger goes on to say that reinforcing the empirical method in social work gives researchers «the power to define the reality of the profession». This leads not only to establishing the knowledge base of the profession but also establishes the practice method of the profession, for example empirically based practice (18).

### **3 The Knowledge Base of the Social Work Profession**

The emphasis on the empirical paradigm indicates that the journal is the core of the knowledge base of the profession. The implication of this is that the foundation of the social work knowledge base should be the journal. The refereed journal becomes a dominant source within which the field articulates its experiences (19). But is this the reality in social work as a profession? Heineman (20) notes with irony that what constitutes good science and hence good social work research never leads to useful knowledge.

Journals are not the only source of knowledge within a profession. Policy, planning, and practice in social work is an environmentally based process (21, 22). Indigenous social, economic and cultural factors are important elements in the

determination of the form and content of policy and planning process and its implementation. This environmentally based process has its own dynamic environment and associated «irrational» factors, which are an essential part in the demands of knowledge. Social work policy, planning and program implementation are influenced by these more subjective factors and therefore demand relevant knowledge in this decision making process. This social process also creates its own type of knowledge.

This process, with its own dynamic environment, has produced a proliferation of documentation. This documentation, because of its distinctive characteristics, remains relatively obscure since it is usually not published in scientific journals. This literature describing policy making, planning and program implementation does not usually reach the stage of publication in professional journals. Rather, it is found in grey documentation.

A grey document is any document which is issued informally, in limited numbers and/or is not available through normal bookselling channels. Examples of grey documents are scientific research reports, theses, papers delivered at professional meetings, proceedings, internal reports, official documents, policy papers, working papers and information output. They may come from voluntary organizations, universities, research and policy institutes, national and regional governments, and from professional and scientific meetings.

The contents of the documents in a grey document data base would include documents written for policy analysis, strategic planning, short-term planning, decision making, evaluation, needs assessment, management information and reporting. The type of person for which these documents was prepared could include elected officials or their representatives, policy-makers, planners, administrators, experts, field workers, practitioners, clients, voluntary associations, lay people, the public, the media and scientists.

Grey documentation can be functional in the production of social work knowledge. Grey documentation may be a more useful tool for the transfer of what Goldstein (13) calls «practice wisdom». Emmert (23) tells us about «ordinary knowledge» which is distributed without being subjected to the systematic examination of science-based knowledge. Yet it is «field-tested» by those who hold such knowledge. Emmert says that it owes its degree of verification to «common sense, causal empiricism, thoughtful speculation and analysis». Harris (24) reports that much of grey documentation is the non-scientific expression of experience. This can include what Machlup (25) called humanistic and artistic knowledge. Humanistic knowledge includes values. Artistic knowledge is considered a body of precepts for practice. A unique characteristic of grey documentation in the human services is that it is conducive to action. This type of documentation can come directly from the field. In relating to grey documentation in this way one may relate to it as «primary» documentation. A predominant amount of grey documentation is published by field professionals as a communication device reporting on their work. This type of documentation has the characteristic of «raw material» as opposed to that published in scientific journals or commercially published books. In grey documentation the lag time between the event being described and date of its publication can also be considerably less in relation to articles published in scientific journals or commercially published books.

#### 4 Grey Documentation and the Social Work Knowledge Base

What does grey documentation within a social work knowledge base have to offer to the social work profession? Berman (21) identified five areas in which a grey documentation data base contributes to and sustains the social work knowledge base\*:

- A) Similar areas of concern to the social worker.
- B) Description of a situation.
- C) What is being done?
- D) How is it being done?
- E) Is it doing any good?

A) *Similar Areas of Concern to the Social Worker.* Grey documentation describes areas of common concern within the profession. This can for example be cross-national comparative studies or individual national studies relating to a specific issue. The Hoger Instituut Voor De Arbeid in Belgium carried out a cross-national comparative study *Services for the Elderly in Europe: A Cross-National Comparative Study* (26) which found that each of the EC member states is addressing the question of which socioeconomic facilities have to be extended in order to adequately handle the increasing need for care. The study found an enormous diversity across the different countries. The Research Institute of Labour and Social Affairs in Bratislava has carried out a study on *Child Care Costs* (27) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (28), US Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. carried out a study, *Differences in Overall Spending Patterns and Spending on Child Care by Family Type*. The variation of studies leads to the practical issue of definition of terms and methods of measurement in similar areas of concern not as an empirical issue but as a communication and learning mechanism.

B) *Description of a Situation.* Grey documentation includes a wide variety of studies which come under this category of concern. This can include macro-studies of national concern, small area studies, studies regarding specific population groups or services. As an example, the Institute for Mother and Child Health in Zagreb, carried out a study on the *Problems of Integration in the Children of Migrants* (29). They found that as compared to native children, children of migrants suffer from more frequent and severe diseases. Medical surveillance over migrant children and infants is less frequent and regular and the migrant population less frequently seeks health care. Another example, the Comunidad de Madrid (30) carried out a study on *The Needs of Children in the Community of Madrid* (Spanish). The focus of the study concerned the description of needs of children, their socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics, the effects of a new born on family dynamics and issues regarding the social support of infants and children within the family. Studies

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\* The following observations were taken from the INFUSE (Information Uses in Social Welfare Policy) Grey Document Archive. The INFUSE grey document archive is a joint project of the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Vienna and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Jerusalem.

of this type relate to Witkin's (31) view that social work practice exists within a social and political arena and should not be reduced to a minimal deterministic approach. The relevancy in these types of studies may be their varied creative, reflective and dramatic discourse which coincides to the existentialistic-humanistic view of social work practice.

C) *What is being done.* Documentation in this area of concern refers to work being done in the field in the application of social welfare policy, planning and practice. Studies in this area include the description of field applications in the social services. The Department of Health and Social Welfare of the Open University at Milton Keynes, England produced a report on Co-Ordinating Care, *Co-Ordinating Care: The Final Report of the Care for Elderly People at Home Project, Gloucester* (32). The project developed and evaluated community based workers in coordinating packages of care (statutory, voluntary, private and informal care) to help elderly people remain in their own homes. The coordination largely involved links between existing agencies. The Economic Studies Program of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., USA examined the determinants of paid home care utilization in the study on *Use of Paid Home Care by the Chronically Disabled Elderly* (33).

D) *How is it being done?* An important part of grey literature is documents based on field experiences describing how services and programs are carried out. This area of grey documentation brings the social work practitioner to the basic level of social work practice in the field. The Oklahoma (USA) Department of Human Service (34) published a Trainer's Guide called *Developing Casework Skills*. The Israel Association for Child Protection in Tel Aviv developed an instrument *Indicators for Identifying Abused Children* (Hebrew) (35), for identifying abused children through observation. This includes indications of physical abuse, behaviour patterns of abused children, indicators of physical neglect, behaviour patterns of neglected children and indicators of sexual abuse.

E) *Is it doing any good?* Evaluation is the primary focus of many grey documents. A report from the Department of Gerontology of St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, Canada, called *Reaching the Rural Elderly* (36) described the delivery of a low-impact exercise program to five rural communities in the province of New Brunswick by seniors 65-80 years in age range. The results include improved personal and community independence, significantly improved participation rates among the more isolated seniors, and continuity of the activity after project completion. In a study on *Ten Years Experience of Home Based Elderly Care in Sweden* (37) by the Department of Social Medicine of the University of Uppsala, Sweden, it was found that by supporting elderly people in their homes, it was possible to decrease the number of institutional beds in relation to the number of aged in the population.

## 5 Discussion

Grey documentation as a source of knowledge has implications for the content of a profession's knowledge base. The criteria of grey documentation to be included

in the knowledge base is difficult to define. Cataloging, abstracting and cross-referencing are also related issues in the inclusion of grey documentation in a knowledge base. Fortunately the issue of the relevance and use of grey documentation is not new. It was an important theme in a study carried out by the President's Science Advisory Committee (38). The study known as the «Weinberg Report» concluded that «technical reports should be refereed or otherwise screened before they enter the internal information system». This conclusion is an attempt to control the admission of grey documentation into recognized, legitimate channels.

The incompatibility of empirical research from the academic setting to the decision maker has been discussed in the literature (39, 40). Rosenblatt (41) found that relatively few practitioners make use of research findings or rate them as helpful. Markus (42) is highly critical of the published article as a source of knowledge for the practitioner. He found that published articles are generally written by workers who are at best on the fringes of real practice. Reading published articles, Markus notes, is an inefficient way of acquiring new knowledge. Goldstein (13) reports on a number of studies which found that there is little connection between theoretical knowing and practical doing. These findings relate to a pertinent question regarding the journal and grey documentation in a knowledge base. Who within a profession uses which types of knowledge. The issue is evident in the differing views of social scientists and decision makers regarding types of knowledge. Who is the audience for Grey Documentation? It is those who get things done, like practitioners. The academic asks about a grey document: «if the document is valuable and relevant why isn't it published in a journal?».

This reality of knowledge use places the archivist and information expert as a facilitator in the dissemination of knowledge. Is the knowledge to be valued for itself regardless of its origins and means of production? Or, can one indeed «tell a book by its cover»? It may be the role of the archivist and information expert to change prevailing notions regarding the value of knowledge based on its source of production. Such an approach may bring about a more compatible relationship in the use of knowledge between the academic and the practitioner within a profession.

## 6 Conclusions

The practicing professions require knowledge from varied sources within their knowledge base. Scientists, based in a university setting, using an empirical approach, will provide the profession with an empirical core of knowledge. This core of knowledge will be found in the profession's journals. At the same time, as a profession, other disciplines will be used as a knowledge source. This will require an integrated approach in knowledge dissemination by archivists and information experts within the journal framework. The practicing professions also produce knowledge, grey documentation, which may be located outside the university setting. This type of documentation is not published in journals or through commercial publishing outlets. Grey documentation may use a post-positivist approach to generate knowledge and fall within the empirical scientific tradition (43). At the same time grey documentation enables the dissemination of non-empirically based knowledge which is useful to practicing professions. This type of documentation

expands the knowledge base of the practicing profession. Grey documentation raises information service management issues. The promotion of knowledge as having a value in itself regardless of its origins is an issue in which the archivist and information expert can play a facilitating role.

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## NORMAS

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En esta sección se pretende incluir los proyectos de normas españolas relativas a información y documentación, durante el periodo en que éstas están sometidas a preceptiva información pública.

En este número se recoge el siguiente proyecto de Norma Española (PNE) aprobado por el Comité Técnico de Normalización núm. 50 de AENOR, Documentación.

Cualquier observación respecto a su contenido deberá dirigirse a AENOR, Fernández de la Hoz, 52, 28010 Madrid.

La versión definitiva del proyecto de norma que se recoge a continuación variará en función de las observaciones formuladas.

### **MICROGRAFIA. VOCABULARIO (continuación)** **PARTES 02, 03, 04 y 05** **ISO 6196** **PNE 50-109**

#### **02 DISPOSICION DE LAS IMAGENES Y SISTEMAS DE MICROFILMACION**

**02.01 Disposición horizontal; modo comic** (término desaconsejado); **orientación B** / *horizontal mode; comic mode; orientation B / enregistrement en mode horizontal; enregistrement comic* (terme déconseillé) / *Bildlage (f) horizontal*

1. Disposición de las *imágenes* sobre el rollo de microfilm de modo que la línea de la escritura o impreso sea paralela a la longitud de la película en idiomas que se escriben en horizontal y perpendicular en idiomas que se escriben en vertical.

2. Disposición de las imágenes sobre una microficha, de modo que la primera *microimagen* se encuentre en la esquina superior izquierda de la *cuadrícula de partición* y las microimágenes siguientes se sucedan de izquierda a derecha en columnas de arriba abajo.

**02.02 Disposición vertical; modo cine** (término desaconsejado); **orientación A** / *vertical mode; cine mode; orientation A / enregistrement en mode vertical; enregistrement cine* (terme déconseillé) / *Bildlage (f) vertical*

1. Disposición de las *imágenes* sobre un rollo de microfilm de modo que la línea de escritura sea perpendicular a la longitud de la película en los idiomas que se escriben en horizontal y paralela en los idiomas que se escriben en vertical.

2. Disposición de las imágenes sobre una microficha de modo que la primera *microimagen* se encuentre en la esquina superior izquierda de la *cuadrícula de partición* y las microimágenes siguientes se sucedan de arriba abajo y en columnas de izquierda a derecha.

**02.03 Cuadrícula de partición** / *grid pattern / grille de partition / Raster* (m)

Entramado de líneas horizontales y verticales (generalmente no representadas) que dividen una zona de una *microforma* (generalmente una microficha) en espacios llamados *fotogramas*.