

Reconsidering the “Idea” of Evidence in Evidence-based Policy & Practice

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Evidence-based policy and practice (EBP) has become an important social work conceptual framework. Yet, the core EBP concept, the concept of ‘evidence,’ remains ill-defined. I propose a reformulation of the concept of evidence as applied to EBP effectiveness questions. As a basis for this reformulation ideas about evidence are examined from cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives including epistemology, philosophy of science, evidence-science, and law. I propose that for EBP effectiveness questions: (1) to be considered “relevant evidence” an explanatory connection between an intervention and an outcome must be established rather than a mere association; (2) the EBP definition of “best available evidence” should include total available evidence (rather than a subset) about effectiveness, causal roles (mechanisms), and support factors and be inclusive of high quality experimental and observational studies as well as high-quality mechanistic reasoning; (3) the familiar five-step EBP process should be expanded to include formulation of warranted, evidence-based arguments and that evidence appraisal be guided by three high level criteria of relevance, credibility, and strength rather than rigid evidence hierarchies; (4) comparative effectiveness research strategies, especially pragmatic controlled studies, hold promise for providing relevant and actionable evidence needed for policy and practice decision-making and successful implementation.