Q-Methodology, Pragmatism, Knowledge Forms and Social Work Practice

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Background: This mixed-method empirical study focused on the types of knowledge held and used by social workers in day-to-day practice through the innovative use of both Q-methodology and semi-structured interviews. My research questions were focused on how social workers obtain knowledge for practice, what forms such knowledge takes, how they use it and what strategies they use to develop it. Q-methodology (Brown 1980) is regarded as a unique means by which one can apply objective measures to examine matters that are inherently subjective; in this case, knowledge preferences and practices of individual practitioners (n=37). The additional use of SSI’s provided methodological triangulation in line with the paradigmatic requirements of MMR.Methods: A mixed-methods approach combining Q-methodology and semi-structured interviews was used. Q-sorts were used to elicit subjective viewpoints from social workers and others on a range of statements relating to professional knowledge - structure, type, form, content, use and dissemination. Q-sort responses were analyzed using PQ-Method (Schmolck 2002) and SSI ‘s undertaken with a representative sample of participants with particular viewpoints thematically arranged and cross-referenced back to original Q-scores.Results: I found that different types of practice equated with different ways of acquiring, using and developing different types of professional knowledge. The results suggest that particular approaches to the acquisition of knowledge, its use and development are aligned to particular types of practice and to practitioners’ essentially pragmatic views regarding ‘what works’ at the level of the individual practitioner and practice context. The findings have implications for social work education, training and management at both pre- and post-qualifying levels as well as for the academic community and the evidence-based practice movement in terms of its ‘hierarchical knowledge hegemony’.

Keywords: Q-methodology; Knowledge; Social work practice; Mixed-methods