

7. Edward J. Mullen's Contribution: A Swedish and a Personal Perspective

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Abstract

This contribution will present Professor Mullen's valuable influence on the formation of the Swedish Centre for Evaluation of Social Services (CUS) and its successor, the Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work Practice (IMS), against a background of decades of debate and struggle around the basis of knowledge for social work practice in Sweden. Already during the 1960s, national politicians in Sweden joined forces with representatives of social services agencies in demanding more research underpinning the practitioners' decisions. The late 1970s saw the establishment of social work as a full academic discipline and an academic upgrading of the training programs. For reasons touched on in this article, however, it has taken until fairly recently for the Swedish social work community to embrace topics on the value and effects of social work interventions and thus support the concept of evidence-based practice. Professor Mullen came to play an important role in supporting CUS and IMS work in this direction.

In my previous positions as director of the Swedish Centre for Evaluation of Social Services (CUS) and its successor, the Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work Practice (IMS), both affiliated with the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, I had the pleasure of a quite long-lasting professional contact with Ed Mullen.

Our first encounter took place in 1997, when—as it says in the conference program—"Willma and Albert Musher Professor Edward Mullen, Columbia University, New York, USA" agreed to contribute to the first international CUS conference, held at Lejonadal Castle in Stockholm. The conference theme

was Evaluation as a Tool in the Development of Social Work Discourse. Thanks to contributors such as Robert Boruch, Juliet Cheetham, Ernest House, Yvonna Lincoln, Peter Marsh, Ed Mullen, Michael Scriven, Robert Stake, and Evert Vedung, the conference gave the mainly Swedish auditorium both broad and deep insights into the state of the scientific evaluation discourse. The experiences at this conference were followed by a comparative analysis of the use of evaluative approaches in social work research (Cheetham, Mullen, Soydan, & Tengvald, 1998).

The theme of Ed's conference lecture in 1997 was "Linking the University and the Social Agency in Collaborative Evaluation Research: Principles and Examples." As his impressive publication list indicates, this issue has been a long-lasting interest of his. His ideas and experiences of attempts to "bridge the gap" (McCartt Hess & Mullen, 1995) between research and practice in social work was very timely for those of us who had the responsibility of developing the CUS research agenda. The role of this new center, established in 1992 and based outside of university settings, was in essence to help contribute to the improvement of the professional knowledge base for social work practice.

7.1 A Weak Swedish Bridge

As in many other countries, the 1990s in Sweden were characterized by demands for more transparency and effectiveness and thus more evaluation of human services organizations. For politicians and practitioners in the comprehensive Swedish social services sector, these demands to develop better knowledge about its value and outcomes for clients and users were, however, largely a revival of themes from the 1960s and 1970s.

At that time the character and achievements of social services were criticized in broad circles, something that in 1982 resulted in a profound modernization of the social services legislation. The parliamentary commission that forwarded the proposals for legislative change also took action with regard to knowledge development. In its report on basic principles for the future of Swedish social services, we find several instances

in which the lack of professional knowledge is noticed and deplored and proposals are made regarding empirical validation, in the forms of continuous follow-up, evaluation, and research on the sector's achieved results (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1974).

The knowledge debate was heated in the 1970s and a solution to the shortcomings was demanded, not least by the trade unions of social services managers and practitioners. The political answer became an upgrading to academic status of all social work training programs in the country (bachelor of social work, 3.5 years), concurrent with the establishment of academic departments of social work with autonomous research agendas and PhD programs at all Swedish universities at the time. This academic superstructure of social work training and research has now existed and expanded considerably during the last 35 years.

In the mid-1990s, the need for information about research achievements for clients and users was again brought to the surface, albeit largely contaminated by urgent cost-effectiveness issues. Now the lack of knowledge about outcomes and effects of social work practices was the main and more specific target of criticism. This situation was not unique to Sweden. Influential American social work researchers noted at the time: "The profession lacks systematic empirical validation of its practice strategies. Ongoing evaluation of social work interventions seems to be a desperate need all over the world" (Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992, p. 187).

However, an important difference between this American viewpoint and the position taken by the Swedish social work research community was Sweden's lack of acceptance or understanding that this type of information need could be a viable academic research topic. Representatives of the academic discipline of social work chose to regard social workers' need for a research base to underpin their professional decisions as a risk that could impair the academic autonomy of the discipline (Bäck-Wiklund, 1993). It was also opposed on epistemological grounds. The discipline of social work had come into being during a period in which Swedish social sciences were influenced by antipositivist philosophies of science and the discipline

followed these critical tendencies to the fullest extent (Månsson, 2001). The most conspicuous consequence was one-sided trust in the use of qualitative empirical methods. Undergraduate education in scientific methodologies has been overwhelmingly restricted to qualitative methods. For example, the vast majority of bachelor's and master's theses from the 1970s onward only used qualitative material (Dellgran & Höjer, 1999), a situation that persisted into the 2000s.

Therefore, the majority of social workers today lack a more balanced and profound understanding of quantitative methods and have simply not received the kind of training on empirical methods that could have prepared them to undertake or participate in serious and reliable evaluation efforts. Nor had the issues of intervention effects and user safety entered the research agenda of social work academia. The professional system as a whole simply lacked the impetus to join forces to develop a professional knowledge base (Tengvald, 1995), and for a decade CUS was often approached by frustrated managers and practitioners needing help evaluating their professional work.

Now the situation is slowly changing. Relevant research is gradually expanding and social services managers are showing increasing interest in implementing evidence-based practice and interventions (Socialstyrelsen, 2013). But the problems in social work training programs still influence this development. Managers observed and deplored a lack of training and understanding of evidence-based practice among their staff members in a recent comparative study, which also showed a lower level of understanding among Swedish practitioners compared to a group of practitioners from the United States (Nyström & Åhsberg, 2014).

It is therefore not surprising that the peer reviewers responsible for the latest national evaluation of all Swedish social work bachelor's and master's programs straightforwardly concluded that social work training programs did not contain teaching and training based on concepts that integrate scientific knowledge and social work practice, e.g., evidence-based practice (Högskoleverket, 2009). Ed Mullen, in his review of CUS performance,

alerted us to the need to develop good relations with social work training programs, a recommendation that turned out to be much too far reaching and challenging for both CUS and IMS. The gap is still to be bridged.

7.2 Ed Mullen and the Inter-Centre Network for Evaluation of Social Work Practice

The first CUS Lejondal conference in 1997 made us recognize the need to establish stable international contacts and thereby sparked the CUS internationalization process. To my recollection, Ed and I had our first chat, during a Society for Social Work and Research conference in Miami, about the possibility of creating a network of research and development centers and institutions interested in developing an empirically validated knowledge base for social work practice. For my part, the idea of a center-institution network instead of an individually based one originated from an urge to develop stable international relationships that were also broadly relevant to our topic of interest.

This discussion of ours continued in Stockholm and Haluk Soydan, then at CUS, took on an important role in translating this idea into the Inter-Centre Network for the Evaluation of Social Work Practice (Mullen, 2006). The first meeting of the network took place in York in 1998, during which one issue of discussion was its outreach efforts. Initially, opinions differed about whether the network should be intercontinental or solely European. Luckily, we all realized the value of having a partner in the United States.

In retrospect and for a person with my presently limited overview of variations in national research and the development of evidence-based practice, it seems that the network has been quite successful. It has survived during a period of turbulence for social work research and withstood structural changes. Some individuals, like me, have left active participation in centers and institutions yet have continued to take part in the network. New organizations and new individuals have joined. Some centers and individuals have remained continuously active. Ed is one of those individuals.

Ed's comprehensive list of publications shows to me that, through his long-term insights into essential social work research and practice issues, he has been generously sharing his knowledge via very timely discussion papers at network meetings. Issues such as the use of assessment instruments; outcome measures and measurement practices; state-of-the-art reviews, impartially putting forward pros and the cons; issues regarding teaching evidence-based practice; and how to implement the concept of evidence-based practice into the reality of social services agencies are examples of topics addressed by his valuable network papers. These research issues have come to function as a platform from which network partners and participants can adapt and employ ideas in their own work on different aspects of the evidence-based discourse.

Ed has taken time to participate in several other European conferences and contribute to anthologies and European scientific journals. He also functions as a more informal advisor in several countries. It can be noted that his experience has been in particular demand in countries where the network has a representative—Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, etc. Thereby, Ed has been patiently spreading his knowledge about radically new forms of social work.

In Sweden, Ed has participated in many activities since our first contact in 1997, including all three of our international Lejongdal conferences. A special moment for me was Ed's acceptance to give the keynote speech at the inauguration of IMS, the institute that succeeded CUS (Mullen, Shlonsky, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2004). He has shared his knowledge and his personal network with the staff at CUS and later at IMS. He is now relied on more broadly in Sweden. In 2013, for instance, he gave a summarizing presentation on evidence-based practice in social work at a national research council conference titled "Evidence-Based Knowledge: Consensus or Controversy."

Toward the end of an active professional life, even distinguished scholars tend to look back at what has been. Ed Mullen strikes me as someone who is mostly doing just the opposite. Not only is he good at pinpointing essential problems

and giving profound summaries of the state of the art, he also continues to present new and promising ways for the future of evidence-based social work research and practice. His work continues to this day, in the form of a presentation of comparative effectiveness research and in his invigorating discussion of its very core: the concept of evidence.

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