

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

Home

Overview

Publications

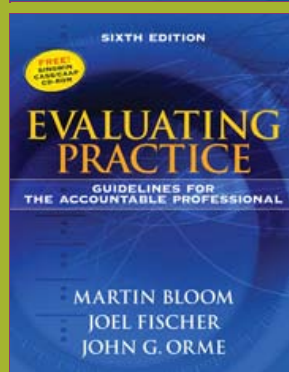
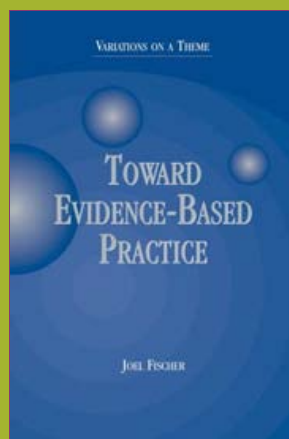
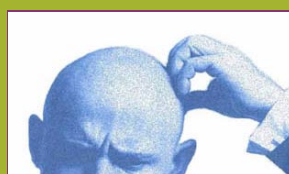
Quiz

Search

Your comments

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1973 Joel Fischer

The father of professional doubt



It is early 1973 when the at the time little known Joel Fischer publishes a paper in *Social Work*, the journal of the US' National Association of Social Workers. After the professionalization of social work through the work of Mary Richmond and the establishment of higher education for social work, Fischer asks the question whether there is any indication on the effectiveness of social casework. Are the goals one expects to reach also reached?

To the surprise of many, research at the time indicated that social casework was not very effective and that about 50% of the clients were worse off after treatment than before. Fischer consequently argues social work should not be satisfied with good intentions, but look critically into the effects of its actions "The issue of effectiveness of practice always must be of paramount concern to the profession and cannot be brushed aside."

Joel Fischer's article caused a debate in the subsequent issues of *Social Work* and other scholarly social work journals. It is probably one of the most reprinted and most cited single publication in the entire social work literature. The article and the ensuing debate can be seen as the start of professional doubt. Not doubt in a cynical way, but as a healthy level of scrutinizing one's work and monitor the effects of social interventions as a foundation for continuous improvements.

Fischer did not linger in questioning the effectiveness of social work, but in the decades after 1973 published several manuals on how to liaise science and social work. His *Evaluating practice* (together with Martin Bloom and John Orme) received its sixth edition in 2009. It focuses on the use of single-system designs to evaluate social work practice.

Fischer had an infectious enthusiasm and optimism about science and social work growing close. He wrote e.g. in 1993: "By the year 2000, empirically based practice – the new social work – may be the norm, or well on the way to becoming so." You could argue that scientific based social work is still not the norm, but the discussion about why and how is certainly dominating a great number of discussions within the profession.

Professional doubt as the driving force behind innovation has gained much attention since 1973. Social work followed in the footsteps of medicine and invests in evidence based practice. Whole libraries have been written on this subject by now and organisations such as [Social Care Institute of Excellence \(SCIE\)](#) or the [Campbell Collaboration \(C2\)](#) make it a core part of their reason of existence to contribute to the scientific grounding of social work.

Additional information

- Fischer, J. (1973), [Is casework effective? a review](#), *Social work*, 18(1), 5-20 (reprinted in 'toward evidence-based practice')
- Bloom, M., Fischer, J., & Orme, J. (2009), *Evaluating Practice Guidelines for the Accountable Professional*, (6 ed.), Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fischer, J. (2009), [Toward evidence-based practice: variations on a theme](#), Lyceum Books, 566p



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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

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