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Short Article

On the importance of the trivial

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Abstract

The term *trivial* is used to describe that which is ordinary and mundane. Many of us have a tendency to turn away from the trivial, drawn instead towards what appears novel and sophisticated. In doing so, we may mistakenly regard it as unimportant, reflecting a common connotation associated with the term. This article explores how such a mistake has been made within the field of residential child care. The text is not grounded in empirical studies in the conventional sense, but rather in the author's observations of the field over several decades, both as a residential care practitioner and as a researcher. Most of these observations stem from a Scandinavian context. The descriptions and reflections presented here may, however, also be relevant to other countries and to residential care more generally.

Introduction

The earliest practitioners in residential child care homes often lacked formal qualifications. One reason for this was that no specific educational programs existed at the time. We may therefore assume that the practices of these pioneers were grounded in folk psychology and widely shared understandings of care and child-rearing.

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In psychological literature the terms 'folk psychology' and 'commonsense psychology' refer to laypersons' everyday psychological knowledge (Rosenberg, 2016). In a sense, we are all psychologists. We can perceive people's reactions as expressions of mental states, to predict how people are likely to act, and to adapt to the needs of others. Terms such as 'theory of mind', 'mentalisation', and 'empathy' are used to describe some of the capacities associated with folk psychology. Humans acquire psychological insight by learning from experience, by listening to more competent people, and through introspection, that is probing into one's own thoughts and emotions.

According to folk psychology, it is important to maintain cleanliness and tidiness in the places where children and young people live, that there are regular routines around meals, that children and young people have a healthy diet, that they do their homework, that they participate in leisure activities, and that everyday life has a predictable structure with fixed times for meals, activities, and rest. These are trivialities but have traditionally been considered central aspects of residential care work.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the field of child welfare underwent a gradual transformation from a field of lay practitioners, through a semi-professional stage, to becoming a fully professional field, with an increasing proportion of those entering it possessing formal qualifications. Residential care workers with formal training brought professional theories with them, applying these to their work with young people. In many residential care homes, a division of labour emerged, where those with formal qualifications tended to prioritise theory-based approaches, whereas those without were responsible for domestic duties and the engagement of young people in leisure activities. There were often status differences, with only the former group being associated with professionalism.

Language plays an important role in establishing status differences. Postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault (1972) and Jean-François Lyotard (1984) have shown how academic discourse can function as a social practice and as an exercise of power. Residential care employees familiar with theory were able to use terms that carried persuasive authority, such as 'object relations', 'transference', 'containment', 'discriminant', 'intermittent reinforcement', and 'self-efficacy'.

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Although many residential care workers without formal training accepted the view that theoretically informed work was more important than the tasks they themselves carried out, some voiced resistance. Those with formal training were sometimes criticised for failing to recognise the importance of trivial tasks. However, as time went by and the proportion of employees without formal qualifications diminished, this criticism gradually subsided. Concurrently, attention to such tasks declined in many quarters.

Throughout the twentieth century, several new theories relevant to residential child care were introduced. Examples of influential theorists include Sigmund Freud (1961), Anna Freud (2018), Erik Homburger Erikson (1965), Donald Winnicott (1986), John Bowlby (1989), Mary Ainsworth (1967), Peter Fonagy (1991), Albert Bandura (1977), Joseph Wolpe (1988), Paulo Freire (1970), Paul Natorp (1974), Anton Makarenko (1955), Lev Vygotsky (1962), Karl Jaspers (1971), Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), Emmy Werner (1993), Jay Haley (1997), and Harlene Anderson (1997).

As the century drew to a close, the number of theories had become extensive. There were several theoretical traditions, also referred to as *paradigms*, and within each of these there was a range of sub-theories. For example, object relations theory is one of several sub-theories within the psychodynamic tradition. In addition, a number of integrative theories had been developed, that is, theories composed of elements from two or more others. Examples of such syntheses include attachment and cognitive behavioural theories.

In the late 1990s, a new movement emerged. Several child welfare scholars called for a ‘clean-up campaign’, where one, through systematic research, should decide which theories hold true and which methods work (cf. Ogden et al., 2009). These scholars started from the premise that the large number of theories about child development implied that several had to be false. To apply a theory without empirical evidence was said to be unprofessional and unethical. The task was to identify which theories are true and which are false, with false theories and ineffective methods to be discarded.

Child welfare scholars were inspired by international figures in psychology who argued for what they called ‘evidence-based practice’ (cf. APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006). There was a

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large, nationwide movement, with which pure experiments, often referred to as 'randomised controlled trials', were held up as the ideal research approach, the gold standard.

A randomised controlled trial is a research method used to decide whether there is a causal relationship between two variables, for example between the form of intervention and externalising problems. The researcher manipulates what is determined to be the independent variable and at the same time records changes in what is determined to be the dependent variable. To rule out that changes in the dependent variable are due to other factors than the manipulation of the tested independent variable, other possible cause variables must remain constant. The strategy for achieving this is to divide the sample into an experimental group and a control group through random selection, i.e. a selection where there is the same probability that a unit (here a person) will be assigned to the experimental group as to the control group. If the sample is of a larger size, the random selection will ensure that the experimental group and the control group are equivalent, in the sense that special characteristics of individuals are evenly distributed between the groups.

Following the intervention period, the researchers examine whether there are differences between the two groups with respect to the dependent variable. Usually, some subjects in both groups have improved, while others have unchanged or decreased functioning. Whether the tested method has a statistically significant effect is calculated based on differences between observed values and those that could be expected if there were no causal relation between the variables. Statistical significance indicates whether an effect is likely real, in other words how likely it is that a conclusion drawn from a sample of observations would hold true for the population from which the sample was drawn. Another common measure used in randomised controlled trials is effect size. This reflects the magnitude of the intervention's impact, i.e. whether the effect matters in real life.

The new movement was named 'the evidence movement' or 'the evidence-based practice movement' (Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004). In texts and talks, proponents of this movement were easily identified through a distinctive professional discourse, in which the following terms were central: 'knowledge status', 'meta-study', 'review', 'evidence', 'evidence-based', 'knowledge-based', 'research-based', 'implementation quality',

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'empirical evidence', 'intervention integrity', 'randomised controlled trials', 'effect size', and 'statistical significance'.

When professional theories were introduced into the field of residential child care in the second half of the previous century, it was the terminology of each individual theory that carried persuasive force. By contrast, the discourse of the evidence movement was methodological. Those who mastered this discourse demonstrated competence in psychometrics as well as in descriptive and inferential statistics.

Critique

The evidence movement has been both influential and controversial, with several critiques raised against it. One critique comes from theoretical traditions whose methods are difficult to evaluate through randomised controlled trials, such as psychodynamic theory (Leichsenring, 2005). Researchers and practitioners within this tradition argue that psychodynamic approaches are tailored to the individual young person's internal processes and are grounded in the relationship between the practitioner and the young person, cf. the concept of transference. Consequently, such interventions cannot be adequately described in brief manuals, nor can they be evaluated solely through quantitative measures. According to these critics, the assumption that randomised controlled trials should constitute the only preferred research design must therefore be rejected.

Another line of critique comes from scholars who draw attention to the fact that, despite an extensive research effort over two decades, exponents of the evidence movement have not found the ultimate method or the ultimate set of methods. If one reviews the research literature, one will find that there is an overwhelming number of studies where the researchers report that an approach has some effect on some children or young people. There is, however, no study demonstrating a decisive impact on most children or young people (Smedslund, 2012; Smedslund et al., 2022). What are referred to as statistical *findings* or *evidence* are sometimes weak correlations that should not be generalised to individuals without careful consideration.

According to critics, this can be explained by the fact that there are many factors that may influence an individual, whereas any given theory typically addresses only one - or a limited number of - factors. The

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formulation of a theory is an abstraction process in which only selected aspects of reality are emphasised (Hermerén, 1974). Analogous to the fact that the map omits most of the details that can be found in the actual terrain, a single theory of human functioning leaves out much of the phenomenon it seeks to explain. These insights suggest that practitioners in residential care should alternate between different theories and apply several in parallel, based on in-depth knowledge of individual young people. Consequently, the field should be cautious about discarding existing theories.

This advice can be further developed by suggesting that professionals, in addition to acquainting themselves with multiple theories, should also acknowledge insights from folk psychology and the importance of the so-called trivial aspects of residential care. Even if the field were to retain most of its traditional theories, there would still be many factors not accounted for by any of them that could significantly influence a young person. This is essentially what practitioners without formal qualifications argued several decades ago.

Seven important professionals

The claims made in the previous paragraph can be supported by some examples. We may imagine a residential care home where A, B, C, D, E, F, and G are members of staff. Residential care worker A is highly skilled in cooking, baking excellent bread and preparing outstanding meals that the young people greatly appreciate. He also teaches them how to cook. For the summer, he plans to involve the young people in building a greenhouse where they can grow tomatoes, cucumbers, and other vegetables.

Residential care worker B is interested in singing and music and plays several instruments. She teaches some of the young people to play the guitar. One of them has become highly skilled and has performed at a school concert.

Residential care worker C is passionate about sports. She has experience in swimming, athletics, and football. She has taught all the young people in the care home how to swim. Last summer, one of them fell out of a canoe but managed well because he was able to swim back to shore.

Residential care worker D is concerned with aesthetics, both indoors and outdoors. He is responsible for purchasing furniture, carpets, and

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paintings for the institution. In daily life, he tends to houseplants and decorates his surroundings with fine tablecloths. During the darker months, he lights candles to create a warm atmosphere. Even when baking a birthday cake for one of the young people, D is attentive to aesthetic qualities. He knows the difference between a plain cake covered only with cream and one decorated with berries, piped icing, written greetings, and a flag.

Residential care worker E is interested in animals. She frequently takes the young people to a riding centre where horses can be hired. She also often brings her own dog to the institution. Several of the young people greatly enjoy playing with the dog. One young girl is particularly fond of it and often lies on the floor petting it. One of the 'tougher' boys is also fond of the dog, gaining an opportunity to show his softer side when the dog comes over seeking affection.

Residential care worker F has skills in both mathematics and languages and is good at providing academic support to the young people. Some of them have previously had high rates of school absence and require assistance in catching up with their peers.

Residential care worker G has specialised in cognitive behavioural modification. He is trained in a behavioural programme that has been evaluated in experimental studies and found to have statistically significant effects.

Of these seven colleagues, only G can be said to directly have an evidence-based practice in the prevailing understanding of the term. Cognitive behavioural theory is among the few theoretical approaches supported by evidence from randomised controlled trials. What A to F do is not clearly described in any of the theories available in the field prior to the evidence movement's clean-up campaign. Nevertheless, many would, upon closer reflection and guided by commonsense psychology, conclude that the efforts of these practitioners are important, indeed highly important.

New theories about the trivial

It follows from the examples above that those who work in residential child care homes need additional theories, theories that deal with the trivial. If one looks beyond mainstream child welfare research, one will

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find that some such theories already exist. Three proposals for where to look are environmental psychology, anthrozoology, and polytechnicism.

Environmental psychology is the field concerned with how people experience and are influenced by the physical environments that surround them, including both natural and built environments (Gifford, 2002). Architectural psychology is the branch of environmental psychology that deals with the built environment, including buildings, interior design, and decoration. A central question within environmental psychology is whether universal aesthetic preferences exist, that is, perceptions of beauty shared by most people. Admittedly, some preferences are historically contingent, such as fashions in architecture, trends in colour, and styles of design, while others are associated with culture or social class. Nevertheless, comparisons across individuals and cultures suggest that certain preferences are indeed widespread. Some researchers argue that such universal preferences are evolutionarily grounded. According to this perspective, environmental features associated with favourable living conditions became universal preferences because groups attracted to such environments were more likely to survive (Appleton, 1975). For example, universal preferences for green and blue are currently thought to exist, as humans who were drawn to environments featuring these colours were more likely to find food and survive.

With insights from the field of environmental psychology, it is possible to design and furnish residential care homes so that young people may thrive. Professionals can also provide aesthetic quality through daily efforts, as D does.

Anthrozoology is the field concerned with relationships between humans and animals (Fine, 2019). In recent decades, it has become established as an interdisciplinary research area encompassing contributions from zoology, psychology, medicine, and pedagogy. According to scholars in the field, companionship with animals may reduce feelings of loneliness, decrease anxiety, be a training venue for caretaking, and provide a basis for intersubjectivity and social interaction with other people. Residential care worker E can confirm all of this.

Polytechnicalism is a theory in pedagogy and social science that explains the importance of education and participation in working life. According to this theory humans are active beings, and through professional training and work realise their potential and find an outlet for the urge to act. Paid

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work offers self-respect and social integration. Among the key theorists associated with polytechnicalism are Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1977), Nadezhda Krupskaya (1957), Anton Makarenko (1955), and John Dewey (1900).

Research has shown that a disproportionate percentage of children and young people in contact with child welfare services experience educational failure, entering adulthood without vocational training or academic education (Kääriälä et al., 2018; Paulsen et al., 2022; Vinnerljung et al., 2005). There are also clear indications that educational support has been a neglected priority within the field of child welfare (Jackson, 2001). One argument for not prioritising education is that children and young people with adverse experiences must recover before they can be expected to focus on schoolwork. It is claimed that maintaining a strong focus on education may place an additional burden on children and young people struggling with severe emotional problems. Residential care worker F opposes this view, believing that shielding young people from schooling and homework does them a disservice. Like researchers oriented toward polytechnicalism, he is aware that educational failure is associated with subequent social problems.

Concluding remarks

The introduction of professional theories was an improvement because it provided access to new concepts, explanations, and methods, but at the same time it represented a step backward, narrowing the field's professional focus. The evidence-based movement further narrowed this focus by discarding theories and methods that could not be validated through randomised controlled trials.

The critique of the evidence movement highlighted that many factors can substantially influence young people, and that we therefore should be cautious about discarding existing theories. Expanding on this critique may reveal the need for additional theories within the field, particularly those addressing the more trivial aspects of residential child care.

As shown in the previous section, some such theories may be borrowed from neighbouring research areas. However, there remains the scholarly task of formulating additional theories concerning everyday life. For example, to my knowledge, there are no theories addressing tasty food and pleasant meals in residential care homes. Someone should take on

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this challenge. It may prove to be one of the most important theories the field has ever seen.

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