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The tyranny of outcomes

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The Tyranny of Outcomes

Abstract

This perspective piece highlights an everyday feature of the work of social workers, their managers and policy-makers. The use of outcomes as a measurement of achievement. The growth of the use of outcomes, their present-day ubiquity, the professed efficacy of their use and their connections with managerialism are then problematized. It is suggested that the deployment of outcomes can serve as a seeming assurance of efficiency. This is to the detriment of less technocratic, softer, more uncertain, yet more realistic and humanist, efforts to describe change and growth. No solutions – or outcomes – are offered. Rather this short perspective piece adopts the approach of 'a problem well stated is a problem half-solved'.

Key words: Outcomes, Social Work Practice

The tyranny of Outcomes

Introduction

The idea for this short paper germinated after reading the views on social work of the then Head of the English regulator for social work (Ofsted): 'Process still matters in social work – but not as much as outcomes' (Schooling 2017) and the question arose 'Is it time to think about 'Outcomes?'. Not the aspiration of seeking the best results, but rather the understanding and definition of 'Outcomes' – the outcome of Outcomes – are raised for debate. Along the way, the roots of the growth and spread of the use of outcomes are located in New Labour's approach to the UK's public services and the drawbacks of reliance on outcomes highlighted. The use of outcomes appears to offer reassurance and assurance yet most results of social work cannot be predicted in advance. Performance indicators, target-driven approaches, outcome-driven planning and practice can result in the danger of 'hitting the target and missing the point' (Calder and Archer 2016, 15).

'Outcomes'

The statement and measurement of outcomes have become accepted as the ultimate measures of quality in social work and care (Malley and Fernández 2010, 565). The trend of an interest in outcomes seems to rise from the time of the arrival of New Labour thinking in the late 1990s when the latter's approach to the welfare services was chiefly characterised by a managerial approach that ostensibly sought to 'modernise' with an emphasis on 'value for money' and the benefits of market-based competition. This approach for instance, brought about the expensive balkanisation of the NHS into purchasers and providers, introduced target-setting, see for example Tony Blair's Adoption reforms that brought in unrealistic time-limits for the adoption of child in care (PIU 2000) and the method of publishing league tables of pupil performance as a means of 'driving up' standards. The result of which was in an increase in poor morale in the schools sector and little significant change in the quality of education. 'Joined-up' services was the mantra. Many social work writers have written on how social work practice has been particularly affected by the continuing legacy of New Labour's managerialism (see for example Webb 2006, Burton and van den

2

Broek 2008, Rogowski 2010, Hood et al 2016 and Rogowski 2019). In the words of one practitioner in Rogowski's research:

> More specifically one referred to managers seeing 'our primary role as turning around assessments as quickly as possible to meet performance indicators' and even being told 'its quantity, not quality' that was the top priority'. (2019 35)

By and large, minor manifestations of mangerialism such as the emphasis on outcomes (the growth of the use of the performance indicators is clearly another) have been absorbed into daily custom and practice with little critical scrutiny. Outcomes are now everywhere. Yet the now ubiquitous reference to outcomes was not always so widespread. A broadbrush visualisation of this using a search for the words outcomes or outcome throughout the first issue of the year of the British Journal of Social Work at ten year intervals between 1989 and 2009 shows a sharp rise in the frequency of the use of the words outcome or outcomes.

Figure 1 Frequency of 'outcome' in BJSW 1989-2009

A simple Control and Find (Ctrl +F) search tool was used covering articles (editorials, papers and reviews) in each of the January editions of 1989, 1999 and 2009. Respectively 1 editorial, 3 articles and 5 reviews over 76 pages (1989), 1 editorial 9 articles and 10 reviews over 206 pages (1999) and 1 editorial, 11 articles and 8 reviews over 206 pages (2009) [1]. This offers a broad picture of the rise of the frequency of use of the words outcome or outcomes. It is appreciated that this is a somewhat crude measure and also noted that a further sample ten years later in the January 2019 edition of the BJSW shows a levelling off. Nevertheless, this indicates a sharp rise in usage to a much greater frequency than ever before (a rise that coincides with the advent of New Labour thinking). But are people better served because of the rise of 'Outcomes'? Schooling's privileging of outcomes over process (2017), signals an emphasis on hard facts and a belief that the clearer the outcomes, the better will be the quality of the service measured. The following four comments problematize this thinking.

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[1] Even allowing for the increased number of pages in the 1999 and 2009 editions, the jump in frequency of mentions remains notable.

1. Outcomes and the Attribution Problem (or the influence of non-intervention based effects)

Malley and Fernández point out that '…it is therefore difficult to disentangle **the providers' influence** on the quality of the service from that of users' (2010, 562 emphasis added). They raise the feasibility of systematic measurement of final outcomes, and point to difficulties in allocating the relative contributions of the various potential ingredients that are separate from the service factors that comprise an intervention, e.g. the behaviour of service users 'during' the intervention. They go on to wrestle with the problem of apportioning causes and effects, refer to the "attribution problem" (2010, 568) and point to a solution to knowing the effect of interventions being based on some assessment of the long-term impacts upon well-being of service users. This is an unconvincing way out of the attribution problem because the conundrum is that results can appear well after a contact or service has finished and even an effect of intervention can come and go across time (Bullock 2004, Blom and Moren 2010).

So are (predicted) outcomes really just claims by those who write them?

2. Who judges?

When more than one discipline is involved (as is invariably the case in social work), the question of whose definition of outcome is to be privileged emerges (Lippman *et al* 2009, 26). Glendinning *et al* use the example of services for older people and point out that: ''Outcomes' can have different meanings for medical and social care professionals and debates about 'medical' vs. 'social' models had impeded the development of integrated outcomes-focused day services in one site' (2008, 60). The potential for differing judgements relating to the status of the 'judges' can involve the issue of care or control when general practitioners' assessments of quality of child care are placed alongside those of child protection workers. Here, despite, efforts to homogenise assessment, differing ethical – and cultural – perspectives can and will be in play. In his problematizing of outcomes in child care, Forrester visits the same terrain: 'the largest challenge in measuring

4

outcomes is who decides what they should be' (2017, 145) and considers arrival at a consensus, for instance where there are differing perspectives on intervention (that of the parent, the child and the social worker), to be 'irreducibly complicated' (ibid).

The next observation raises a problem at the very core of outcomes, the problem of measurement.

3. Outcomes and the problems of measurement, facts and evidence

The rise of Outcomes seems to correspond with popularity for 'Evidence-Based Practice' (EBP). EBP's associate, according to Nothdurfter and Lorenz (2010), is the 'What Works' agenda. Both phenomena, it is suggested, are driven by a belief in the power of facts. In fact, a fetishisation of facts.   The problems inherent in the various dimensions of formulating, deciding and measuring outcomes have already been noted, and EBP too has come in for its fair share of critics.

In their discussion of debates over EBP, Nothdurfter and Lorenz observe that 'The aims of social work (and parallel to that, also those of social policy) cannot always be expressed immediately in measurable outcomes' (2010, 56). However, in his refutation of critiques of EBP, Cargill falls back on the value of measurement: 'But, if indeed EBP cannot be proved *effective*, client's outcomes can still be measured and these at a more specific level can give insight into the value of the EBP model' (2015, 8 emphasis in original). Measurement appears regularly in Outcomes discourse (as well as that of EBP). Other words that regularly appear are: robust, customer, transformation; derivations of the verb 'drive' as in 'driving' 'drivers' (for change), 'drive up' or 'drive down'. The language is that of a 'know how' as distinct from a 'know why' approach (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, 29) and is borrowed from – it is suggested – a (failed) business model, e.g. if it's not quantifiable or measureable, it doesn't exist or holds little meaning. The language lends itself to product (output) and therefore 'others' those towards whom outcomes are applied.

One of the chief methods of testing outcomes is inspections and yet inspections are like your car's annual MOT and can fall into the trap of 'inspected good today', failed tomorrow. There is a hint of this in Ferguson et al's recent evaluation of Ofsted's Framework for

5

Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in England: 'the fact an organisation received a judgement of 'good' in their last judgement inspection is not always a good indicator of the need to reduce the resources for the next judgement' (2019, 63–64). Outcomes-talk trades in certainty and does not sit well alongside concepts such as gut feeling, intuition and instinct, 'fuzzy logic' and emotional intelligence. The latter do not lend themselves to being counted, nor do the 'results' of their application. In his critique of the What Works agenda Vandenbroeck remarks that 'When the main question for researchers is "what works", this may mean the end of the debates on what working is. Or whom "it" is supposed to work for' (2018, 35).

So is agreement on timing of measurement, who does the measuring, when, where, and over what length of period, then unachievable? Freire thought so: 'We are surrounded by a pragmatic discourse that would have us adapt to the facts of reality. Dreams, and utopia, are called not only useless, but positively impeding' (2002, 7).

4. Outcomes and meaninglessness

The drive to devise measurements has resulted in a complex mushrooming of 'proof' indicators. For example, the Scottish Government's standards for wellbeing outcomes for children are known as 'SHANARRI' (Safe. Healthy. Achieving. Nurtured. Active. Respected. Responsible). Each of these outcomes has its own Well-Being Sub-Indicators, the overall total of sub-indicators is 308. There are twenty-six sub-indicators under the category 'Respected'. One of which is 'Mostly happy and satisfied with life, smiles and laughs a lot'

Figure 2 SHANARRI indicators (Safe, Healthy, Active, Nurtured, Achieving, Respected, Responsible, Included): Respected.

68

(https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/media/5007/westernisleschildprotectioninteragencyprocedures.pdf)

The connection between Outcome (Respected) and Indicator ('laughs a lot' – bullet point 16 out of 41) is tenuous and tendentious. It poses the question of the need for another (sub-sub-indicator?) to help 'define satisfied with life'.

6

Elsewhere, to cite an example from Higher Education, the UK Government's Office for Students has devised this set of standards of 'evidence to evaluate impact of outreach'.

Figure 3 'Using standards of evidence to evaluate impact of outreach'

(Office for Students 2019, Using standards of evidence to evaluate impact of outreach, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/f2424bc6-38d5-446c-881e-f4f54b73c2bc/using-standards-of-evidence-to-evaluate-impact-of-outreach.pdf)

In these examples, which – it is suggested – are typical, outcomes can beget more mini-outcomes, each one needing its own indicator with scope for potentially endless, Russian doll-like indicators, for instance, 'what might be a measure/indicator for SHANARRI's 'satisfied with life'? Or, as in the example from The Office for Students, outcomes can be spread over short, mid and long-term with each appearing to have a constructive connection with the one that has gone before, though in reality, such reliance on linearity (and the power of diagram), simply offers reassurance. The Scottish Government works from an aspiration ('Respected') towards multiple examples of mini-behaviours supposed to constitute being respected in an ever-increasing effort to define its components. The Office for Students material begins with vagueness ('greater expectation of self') and works forward to evermore vagueness ('improved chances'). Writing about the latter type of outcomes-usage in education, McGhan remarks that 'most exit outcomes express very general characteristics like those in a typical job reference letter: 'works well with others'' (1994 1).

Closing Observations

Firstly, outcomes are often promises of expected gain (CCPS 2010) or envisaged results: 'In this paper, outcomes are defined as the impact, effect or consequence of a service or policy. Outcomes-focused services are therefore those that meet the goals, **aspirations** or priorities of individual service users' (Glendinning *et al* 2008, 55 – emphasis added). Yet, in the vast majority of instances, outcomes can only truly be known in retrospect. Kierkegaard's observation that we live our life forward but can only understand it backwards seems worth repeating here.

7

Secondly, in the mix of public, professional and organisational expectations of outcomes, Burton and van den Broek refer to '…tensions between professional and bureaucratic accountabilities' (2009, 1339). Because of widespread risk-averseness in, especially child protection practice but also elsewhere, the latter (managerial outcomes) will dominate. Yet, the language and general discourse of outcomes offers only a comfort blanket to managers. Notwithstanding this, an emphasis on outcomes is seen as the answer to the challenges of contemporary social work practice. For example, the oft-complained-about managerialism is countered by what? More managerialism: 'Our challenge in Dorset, similar to the national picture, is that social work has become too bureaucratic…we need to demonstrate consistent and measurable outcomes for children and families' (Gill, Conroy and Tough 2016). The irony here is that the creation of more outcomes might be a recipe for greater bureaucracy not less.

Finally, it was earlier suggested that an emphasis on outcomes and Outcomes-talk had eclipsed the more feelings-based, intuitive/instinctive dimension of practice. These qualities and soft skills do not sit readily well in the world of Outcomes. It seems heresy to argue for the place of dreams, uncertainty, ambiguity, and 'soft' thinking (think Freire's utopia), in the world of social work plans and interventions and the education of social work students, but to leave off where this commentary began, has the problem been stated well enough?

> *Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted* (Einstein)

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