

Ethnography meets evaluation: identifying the 'professional' support needs of social work students

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This paper brings together questions about the 'fit' between evaluation, viewed as a pragmatic and outcome focused approach to enquiry, and ethnography, with its in-depth agenda and frequent focus on the symbolic underpinnings of social actions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Gobo, 2008). In this paper the authors discuss aspects of an evaluative project they conducted which aimed to explore the use of tutorial group support for social work students in a UK university. The project was carried out during the 2008/9 academic year. Ethnographic observations were used alongside interviewing, focus groups and documentary analysis and this allowed deeper issues relating to 'professional' identity and identification (Dent & Whitehead, 2002) to be explored.

Social work 'tutor groups' in this university consist of up to 10 students within the same BA or MA cohort; the group stays together throughout their course as they prepare for employment as professional social workers and engage in practice placements. Each tutor group is facilitated by a social work staff member or part time tutor, all of whom are normally qualified social workers. The project aimed to establish the intended purpose(s) of professional 'tutor groups' in the qualifying level social work curricula, with reference to external professional requirements (set by the General Social Care Council). Specific project objectives were to:

- explore tutors' and other staff and student expectations and experiences of tutor groups in qualifying level social work education in this university
- establish time and other resources used in delivering tutor groups during one academic year, and how this related to other aspects of the curriculum

On one level the project therefore aimed to evaluate how useful these tutorial groups were to students and staff, and to raise managerial issues about the use of resources within the department. One of the reasons for carrying out this project was however the dearth of research, especially from social science perspectives, into the processes involved in this kind of student group support for social workers and related professionals (as noted by Watson & West, 2003). Although some other researchers have considered relevant issues such as 'reflective practice' (Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001) or emotional support (Cartney & Rouse, 2006) structural and contextual issues such as temporal or spatial factors within groups or when placing this form of support within curricula, as well as examination of *how* students acquire professional values or identities, have largely been neglected (Watson & West, 2003).

The use of in-depth research methods including ethnographic observations allowed the researchers, neither of whom is a professional social worker, to unpack some of the issues involved in how staff and students are constructing or maintaining 'professional' identities (Bell, 2007) around an ambiguous, 'liminal' space (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). One of the researchers is an anthropologist and lecturer in the university who teaches research methods to social work students and the other has a sociology background and is a research fellow in the department. Consequently the project's ethnographic aspects also raised issues about the researchers' ambiguous positions and identities as insiders/outsideers in this context.

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