

My Empirical Barber

Jimmy McCarter is a splendid haircutter. I am very satisfied with how well he does with the raw material I confront him with. Since I am interested in how skilled people "know what to do," I like to watch and talk with people like Jimmy McCarter who seem to "know what they're doing." Two haircuts ago I was surprised by what I thought was some new barber-behavior. Jimmy was periodically placing the comb on end to radiate out from points on my head, then raising the locks, taking a look, and snipping.

By now you have probably surmised something that took me a few questions to grasp: Jimmy was measuring the length of the lock with a ruler molded into the spine of his comb. He said it was "the only way to go nowadays," and that he was "positive" it made for a more accurate haircut "without a doubt." Very interesting, I thought, as I put on my glasses and started to participate in the post-intervention evaluation. It looked pretty good, until, whoops, I noticed that the left sideburn was a half-inch lower than the one on the right. Aha! measurement gone awry, I thought! When I pointed out the faulty sideburns to Jimmy, he told me that it is all in how you look at it. I was looking in a way in which virtually no one else did, head-on. In fact, he used the reliable comb to prove that the sideburns were exactly the same distance from the *bottom* of each ear!

What happened next, you may wonder? Jimmy being skilled with the client as well as with the hair, and I having read the principles of negotiation in pure and abstract form, we arrived at a compromise in which he fiddled a bit with the left sideburn and I could no longer decide whether to

gauge bottom-up or top-down, or whether I was leaning or not anyhow.

On a subsequent visit, I was a bit better prepared to record my experience, and I told Jimmy that I was thinking about writing it up. He said that the last time that happened, back when he was a bar bouncer, he wound up getting married to the journalist for four years, but that he would share his convictions anyhow for these philosophical purposes. He said that since haircutting "*has become an art*" absolute accuracy is a must. I asked whether science entered the picture at all, and I learned that "that, too" was involved, although it was more directly applicable to hair coloring than cutting. Measuring was very important to him in achieving the desired artistic result, but he confessed with a shade of contempt that about half of his co-workers never bothered, and that some others were not "reliable." In response to my query, he said that meant that they did not always measure or measure properly. When I asked whether I could stand outside the door and tell which exiting clients had been measured and which ones had not, he said that I could not. "What you've gotta remember is that people have different ways of getting what they want," he said.

Naturally, this situation made me think of some parallels in the field of social work, and especially of the peculiar business of "empirical" practice, which is often taken to mean "scientific" practice in which as many elements as possible are specified and measured as precisely as possible. But "empirical" refers to something that is based on experience, experiment, or perceived sensory stimulus. It involves a reality derived from the senses rather

than from ideas alone. "Empirical" is not synonymous with "scientific." Thus, the creation of art or the enactment of practice would appear to be highly empirical activities, whether or not they involved the supposedly scientific tools and methods of measurement, comparison, and replication, wouldn't they? Certainly, given this definition, the professional haircutter should be empirical, whether or not a ruler-comb is used. If, conversely, any practitioner were purely empirical, how would he or she "know what to do" when there was no precise replication of conditions (e.g., when practice occurs "in the real world")? Doesn't knowing involve some sort of mental process concerning that which the senses offer?

Why, then, do we tend to limit the term "empirical social work practice" to that which tries to measure, and usually to quantify every possible dimension so as to narrow down cause and effect relations? Isn't virtually all practice empirical, even as it embraces many cognitive, reflective, theoretical, and creative dimensions?

I would welcome your own ideas on the subject, especially if you have a non-empirical barber whose practice and "outcomes" you can describe.

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