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Topics Addressed:

Research Agenda and Practice Fields in the
Professional Practice of Social Work

Linking Social Work Education and Research

Organizing the needed research and developing standards of research matching other bodies of knowledge, such as medicine, sociology, and psychology began in the schools of social work and later translated into the complex fields of practice. What quickly became apparent is that the diversity of practice would dictate that no one theory could guide social work practice, but there would need to be several theories. Social work practitioners would need to be taught how to assess and choose the necessary theory for the particular client situation, evaluating its effectiveness and changing the intervention as dictated by its effectiveness. It also became clear that more than one theory may drive a case (a "case" being defined as a single client, family, or group). In 1949 the Social Work Research Group was established to help bring special focus to these challenges. Such challenges continue today.

Social work education is primarily divided into three levels, the Baccalaureate (BSW) level, the Master (MSW) level, and the Doctorate (DSW or PhD) level. The expectation is that the commitment of the BSW practitioner is minimal in adding to the research base. What is expected is that BSWs have knowledge of theory and research, how to read and interpret it, and how to use it in practice. Their practice outcomes add to the field of research.

The MSW level, while preparing primarily for practice, supervisory, and management positions, does have an expectation that these practitioners will contribute to the field of research by examining cases and conducting studies that show the effectiveness of their practice. However, the reality is that these practitioners, with high caseloads, do not have the time to conduct research.

At the DSW /PhD level, the expectation is that, in addition to administration and teaching, research will be of paramount importance. Thus, this level of education is what drives research and places an obligation on Doctors of Social Work to link with the BSW, and in particular, the MSW practitioners to produce practice-based research that will enrich the field and identify effective interventions or discourage approaches that do not achieve the desired results.

Research Needs

Because social work focuses on the intra- and the interpersonal aspects of clients' lives research must consider these aspects as well as the various settings of the client. The broad range of practice settings and roles makes it difficult to succinctly explain the various areas of that social work research that are needed because practice modalities and client needs continue to change.

Fields of Practice Affecting the Research Agenda

The following is an overview of the various fields of practice; while not a final list it is meant to identify the complexity of and need for social work research today. In social work interventions it is understood that assessment is necessary in determining what the issues are facing the client or client system and the need for case management (the organization and assistance in implementing a case plan) is necessary. Additionally, The National Institutes of Health clearly states that critical behavioral and social factors affect the health and wellbeing of people and are important areas for research regarding treatment and, very importantly, prevention. (See Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, NIH Plan for Social Work Research).

The need to know what changes in behavior and social factors could contribute to the effective functioning of clients and the efficiency of programs is important both from a human factor and a cost factor perspective:

Family Interventions
- Employment issues
- Family therapy
- Crisis intervention
- Housing
- Adult education
- Incarceration and integration back to communities and families
- Family violence
- Family planning

Child Services
- Safety/ child welfare/ foster care/ prevention abuse and neglect
- School social work
- National and international adoption

Medical Services
- Mental and physical illness
- Substance use and abuse
- Catastrophic
- Congenital and accidental disability
- Developmental/ learning disability
- Hospice/ end of life counseling

Aging and Gerontology
- Community services
- Residential care
- Caregiver issues
- Medicare
- Housing
- Elder abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, financial exploitation

Anti-poverty Programs
- Job training/ placement
- Income assistance
- Food bank
- Homelessness

Transitional Programs
- Immigrant and refugee services
- Veteran services

Administration
- Program development and implementation
- Clinical supervision and consultation
- Ethical issues
- Board and task force involvement

Clinical Issues
- Counseling/ psychotherapy/psychoanalysis/group therapy

Discrimination Issues
- Racism, ageism, sexism
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender supports

Research Agenda

Examination of the above practice fields and issues suggest that creative approaches in the area research may include coordination of efforts among educational institutions, the various levels of practitioners' education, practice agencies and organizations, and of course the clients themselves. Two types of research approaches dominate the research field: qualitative research (exploratory research and the development of hypotheses for future research; ethnographic study; and single case designs); and quantitative research (survey data gathering and analysis; may include meta-analysis of completed survey date, e.g. U. S. Census, large study data banks). In addition, social work is very concerned with outcome studies to determine if practice approaches are as efficient and effective as they should or could be to assist clients and maintain agency and organization implementation of services.

Social work research must be practice based; practice must inform research and research similarly informs practice. Educational institutions are well positioned to interface with the practice community in order to ensure the focus of research meshes

with the real world needs, and also critical is the need to coordinate on a multidisciplinary level with allied professions and organizations.

The future agenda of social work research is multifaceted and involves four main areas. One area, *health care,* includes discharge planning and care management, prevention of illness, effectiveness of health promotion, teen pregnancy prevention, mental health services including returning veterans and survivors of domestic violence. A second area needing continued attention is *general family issues* of child care, aging, family supports, family-centered practice, and family preservation. An added area are the *underserved communities* including persons substance abuse issues, refugee and immigrant groups, minority rights, welfare reform, housing and community development, economic depreciation and the accessing of services. This also encompasses *community needs* such as disaster preparation and response services, homeless service needs, the delivery of human services, public housing, schools in communities, and welfare to work programs. And last, creative approaches in meeting both national and international needs of clients that involve faith-based services, volunteerism, educational externship and internship programs, forming linkages among various disciplinary teams for more effective and efficient delivery of services.

Conclusion

Social work is a dynamic field of practice driven by sound educational programs and research methodologies that build on that of other disciplines, as well as research that stands on social work practice exclusively. Social work research also has assisted, and will continue to do so, in the development of programs that affect the daily lives of the

citizens of the United States from all social classes with an array of social issues that if

left unattended will affect the quality of life for all or our citizens.