



Integrating Research and Practice Through Social Work Education



Bruce A. Thyer,
*College of Social
Work, Florida State
University*

One feature that distinguishes professional social work practice from historical approaches to charity, philanthropy, societal improvement, and almsgiving are efforts to ground the field on a solid footing of social and behavioral science (Abbott, 1931). To this end, the field made a transition from vocational preparation via an apprenticeship model and of learning-

on-the-job, to a college or university-based structured curriculum combined with carefully supervised internships, leading to an undergraduate or graduate degree. This editorial will describe specific ways in which social work education could be aligned more clearly with research training so as to promote the empirical foundations of practice and policy.

Teaching About Human Behavior in the Social Environment

Familiarity with social and behavioral science theories relevant to social work practice, theories aimed at explaining the causes of psychosocial problems and other phenomena, and explaining how psychosocial interventions may work, is seen as an essential component of professional social work education. One way to deliver a more research-informed curriculum is to ensure that the human behavior theories which are taught are those that have a more solid grounding in empirical support, and avoid teaching theories lacking research support, or more urgently, avoid teaching theories known to be false. While good theory can be a very effective guide to assessment and practice, bad theories can be positively harmful (Thyer, 2012) and it is essential that these be avoided. At the very least, instructors should make clear the degree of empirical support behind whatever theories they do decide to teach their students.

Teaching Social Work Practice

Social work practice coursework should focus on teaching students methods of psychosocial assessment and intervention which have more of a supportive re-

search foundation, relative to teaching practice methods which possess less research support, or none at all, or perhaps, those already shown to not be legitimate. Not all assessment methods and interventions are equally effective, and professional ethics assert that we draw upon the existing empirical research knowledge to guide what we chose to teach. There are many resources available to help locate interventions with strong research support, including the websites of the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations, the National Registry of Evidence-based Practices and Policies, the Coalition for Evidence-based Policy, and the website on Research Supported Psychological Treatments (all these can be readily located online). Social work practice courses could focus on a particular psychosocial problem (e.g., chronic mental illness) and provide students with didactic and skills based training in research-supported methods of assessment and treatment related to that problem (see Myers & Wodarski, 2014). This would be far preferable to centering courses on a particular theory or model of practice (e.g., ego psychology, solution-focused brief therapy, or cognitive-behavioral treatment). Rather, problem-focused classes would electrically draw upon all research-supported practices and be centered solely upon teaching ‘what works’, rather than techniques derived from a singular theory or practice model.

Teaching Social Welfare Policy

Social welfare policy courses should of course include content on the philosophical and historical foundations of current policies, but a research-informed approach to teaching about policy would examine the empirical support particular contemporary policies enjoy. For example, many countries provide payments to the unemployed, for varying periods of time. The question has been raised, “Do longer periods of unemployment insurance benefits prolong periods of unemployment?” Current research provides a provisional answer to this question (see Filges, Geerdsen, Knudsen, & Jørgensen, 2015). Does Medicaid (America’s health insurance program for poor people) coverage promote health? Some primary studies address this



issue (e.g., Baicker et al., 2013). Virtually any policy issue can and should be examined through the lens of asking what current research exists demonstrating that the policy is effective. Understanding policy evaluation studies may require additional research training above and beyond that normally provided to students, given its specialized nature, such as content on interrupted time series designs.

Teaching Social Work Research

Social work research at all levels of instruction, bachelors, masters and doctoral, should primarily focus on teaching evaluation methods, such as pre-experimental, quasi-experimental, and experimental designs and single subject research designs. Related methods which directly tie into social work practice such as the design and conduct of needs assessments and client satisfaction studies, approaches which social workers may actually find useful in their everyday practice, should also be taught. Research methods which are aimed at developing and extending behavioral and social science knowledge without any direct applications to practice, should be avoided at the bachelors and masters level, and be reserved as cognate classes for doctoral students with specialized interests.

Summary

The above model of professional education could be seen as quite radical, or as the natural culmination of a progressive series of steps undertaken over the past century to align the practice of social work with the

findings of contemporary science. None of these initiatives need detract from the essentially humanist foundations of the profession, and indeed their advocates, such as the author, believe that moving in these directions will enable the profession to better serve society.

References

- Abbott, E. (1931). *Social welfare and professional education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baicker, K., Taubman, S. L., Allen, H. L., Bernstein, M., Gruber, J. H., Newhouse, J. P., Finkelstein, A. N. (2013). The Oregon experiment- Effects of Medicaid on clinical outcomes. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 368, 1713-1722.
- Filges, T., Geerdtsen, L. P., Knudsen, A. D. & Jørgensen, A. K. (2015). Unemployment benefit exhaustion: Incentive effects on job-finding rates. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 25, 21-43.
- Myers, L. L. & Wodarski, J. S. (2014). Using the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) evidence-based practice kits in social work education. *Research on Social Work Education*, 24, 705-714.
- Thyer, B. A. (2012). The potentially harmful effects of theory in social work. In B. A. Thyer, C. N. Dulmus & K. M. Sowers (Ed.). *Human behavior in the social environment: Theories for social work practice* (pp. 459-487). New York: Wiley.

Correspondence concerning this paper may be addressed to Bruce A. Thyer, Ph.D., College of Social Work, 296 Champions Way, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306, USA: Email: Bthyer@fsu.edu