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Thoughts on the Use of Knowledge in Social Work Practice

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The quest for making social work a discipline based entirely on empirical research findings is not new. In this article, the authors briefly review the field of social work in the United States during the past 100 years and discuss how the quest for the status of a profession forced the emphasis on empirical research. However, the authors claim that now and in the past, social work is a most complex field and that many of its basic ingredients are inherently difficult to study. They conclude this article, with a call for social work to continue stressing the “science” side by enhancing careful evidence-based practice, does not hamper the field from evolving and from practitioners using the “art” side of social care.

Keywords: *social work history; profession; evidence-based practice; scientific knowledge*

THE EVOLUTION OF THE QUEST FOR SCIENTIFICATION

More than 100 years after social work evolved from its humble origins, we still lack a clear understanding as to what exactly social work is and what social workers do. Walter (2003) noted that, “pressured to be a ‘proper profession,’ social work often failed to attend to its ambiguous and improvisational nature” (p. 317). Opportunities for social work graduates with a master’s in social work (the MSW is the terminal practice degree and is required for licensure in most states) are varied and many, and what master’s-level social workers do is significantly different from what graduates did some 20 and 50 years ago. As such, defining social work and social work tasks, and the field overall, is quite elusive and a source of many publications and discussions (cf. Gibelman, 1999; Goldstein, 1999; Haynes & White, 1999; Witkin, 1999). Not surprisingly, a recurrent debate in the social work community is whether social work is best characterized as art or science (Eaton, 1958; Goldstein, 2001; Robbins,

1999). In recent years, there has been a strong push to favor the science aspect of the profession and to diminish the art side. This quest for “scientification” of social work in the United States is logical and expected, but it is not as easily achieved in social work as in other fields and, as we argue, may not be in the best interests of social work.

Social work in the United States evolved from friendly visitors and charity organization societies that aimed at systematic care for the individual needy and indigent and their families. The profession also evolved from the settlement house movement that saw poverty and social ills as a result of systemic forces such as insufficient education, insufficient command of the language, and low-level sanitation. It was a field of work that moved from using altruistic volunteers to establishing positions for paid professionals (Lubove, 1965). These paid workers laid the foundation for modern social work. They developed social service agencies, training programs for new workers, and national meetings to exchange knowledge and developed practices. They also questioned themselves as to the degree to which they were developing as a profession. In 1915, Abraham Flexner (1915) addressed the National Conference on Charities and Correction. Flexner was at that time the most famous public intellectual and the one who evaluated and revolutionized medical training in the United States (Bonner, 2002). His acceptance of the invitation to speak to the National Conference on Charities and Correction was in itself a sign of professional maturity and public recognition. In his seminal lecture, he discussed the definition of a profession, identifying six qualifying criteria, and social

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work's position, vis-à-vis the status of a profession. He concluded that social work lacked its own theoretical and scientific knowledge base, drawing primarily on the knowledge of other professions to carry out its practice and engaging in work to coordinate and link these other professions, and therefore did not meet the higher standard of profession manifest by fields including engineering, medicine, law, and preaching.

Since this famous address, the social work community has been eager to upgrade its status to a full-fledged profession. There is a sense of inferiority when other academic disciplines are labeled profession and social work is not. Various attempts to upgrade social work's status in society have included its acceptance into academic universities, formation of many academic journals, development of knowledge through research, control over a few domains such as child welfare, licensing for practitioners in most states, the formation of a National Association for Social Workers (a professional association but not a union), and the formation of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The CSWE is an organization of schools and departments of social work and of the faculty who teach in these academic institutions. It focuses on enhancing the quality of education and the adherence of all schools and departments to curricular guidelines.

However, Etzioni (1969) and Toren (1972) still did not see a way for social work to be a profession such as medicine and law and labeled it a "semi-profession"; Tice (1998) concurred. Donald Schön (1983) labeled social work a "vagrant profession," one of many unsatisfying descriptions that seem to leave social work yearning and striving for more recognition.

Many social work reports and discussions in the following years focused on the issue of professionalization and the lack of systematic knowledge base. For example, the Milford conference, which convened between 1925 and 1929, was designed to be

an effort to answer whether social work was a disparate group with technical skills or a unified profession with integrated knowledge and skills, the numerous conference participants concluded that social work is one singular profession with more similarities than differences among its specialties. (Holosko, 2003, pp. 274-275; see also Brieland, 1977)

Similarly, the 1951 Hollis-Taylor report (Hollis & Taylor, 1951) report asked the question: Does social work possess a systematic body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the various areas of social work practice? The authors of the report actually doubted if social work knowledge was advanced enough to be included in universities. As a response to the Hollis-Taylor report,

the CSWE carried out a series of studies and reports geared to meet the challenge of professionalization and systematizing the knowledge base, including a thorough review of how research is taught in schools of social work and how it can be improved (Mencher, 1959).

Clearly, many of the critiques regarding professionalization of social work focus on the lack of a systematic scientific knowledge base informing social work practice. Since Flexner's lecture, social work has developed into its own unique field with values, research, knowledge, and practice standards. In the United States, social workers are quite solidly in academia, and social work training is accredited nationally according to a unified set of standards. But the quest for professionalization is not yet satisfied, and the quest for the desired status of a full-fledged profession is still strong. The field, however, is facing pressure from two separate—and competing—directions. At the same time that social work is developing its unique identity, ethics, knowledge base, and practice standards, the field is also struggling against its demise and factors that inhibit its ability to strengthen the use of knowledge in practice.

David Austin (1983), in his review of the Flexner lecture and its impact on social work, concluded that perhaps the greatest subsequent impact on the social work profession was Flexner's belief that a profession must have a "technique capable of communication through an orderly and highly specialized educational discipline" (p. 368). Given the diverse nature of social work, this was ostensibly not possible. What is it, then, that prevents social work from reaching that desired scientific state that will permit it to become a true profession?

BARRIERS TO SCIENTIFICATION OF SOCIAL WORK

Social work has emerged as a unique field of study and practice with its own knowledge base; professional standards, values, ethics, licensure, and certification; and accredited schools and degrees. The field is closer to professionalization now than in the time of Flexner's speech. There are, however, three factors, each with a polarity, or even a paradox, that present a hindrance to social work's being considered within the professional and scientifically-based realm of practice. First, social work is both a type of work and a discipline—it is a diverse field involving practice in a variety of societal sectors and includes social workers doing work not exclusively considered social work and non-social workers filling social work roles. Second, social work is both an art and a science. And third, the field of social

work is facing, simultaneously, evolution and erosion. Although social work may appear to be “ambiguous” and “improvisational” (Walter, 2003), another view of the field explains and challenges this perception.

Diversity in Social Work

The perceived ambiguity of the field, we believe, in part, stems from the fact that social work is a diverse field and that social workers are involved in numerous types of activities. Social workers as part of their core function can provide psychotherapy and still be mainstream social workers; they can plan a takeover of city hall and also be mainstream social workers; they can care for individuals, families, communities, institutions, causes, and even states and in all be part of mainstream social work. Social work is defined not so much by what people do but by the approach they bring to the work and the education they received.

Adding to the confusion, social work is both a type of work and a discipline. Some roles are uniquely those of social work. These roles are often labeled with a social worker title; they may be filled by individuals with social work training and education (degrees and licenses) and may require such a background. For example, many schools are employing social workers with an MSW and would not hire anyone without such a degree. Some states in the United States require that social workers practicing in particular areas (e.g., psychotherapy) hold state social work licensure. Social worker positions may also be—and frequently are—filled by individuals serving as social workers who do not, actually, have formal social work training or education. This is quite common in the United States in numerous child welfare agencies, for example, where the people who carry out home investigation and make decisions about child well-being are holding baccalaureate degrees in anything from sociology to physics (Gelles, 1996; Stoesz, 2002).

Other roles, however, would not be considered social work but may be filled by those with social work training who bring their social work skills, values, and knowledge into their work, such as human resources managers, probation officers, and school or hospital administrators. Again, this is not a new topic of concern to social work. The 1951 Hollis-Taylor report (Hollis & Taylor, 1951) already found that social work does not have a well-defined and identified function, and that the great preponderance of people engaged in social work activities were without professional education. Furthermore, unlike mature professions such as law and medicine, social work does not have a strong hold over society to prevent

unqualified people from practicing. There are very few sanctions imposed on those falsely claiming to be social workers. In fact, in some countries, such as India, social work means any good willing volunteerism. This is important because the public perception of the profession is part of a profession's power over society. Although medicine and law have numerous subspecialties and subfields, they have the ability to impose their will over society that they, and only they, will occupy positions labeled as physician or lawyer.

But this presumed weakness is also a strength for an evolving profession such as social work. After a mere one century, social work is still in search of its limits and domain. Being able to search for new fields of practice, identify new potential clients, and compete with other disciplines over fields of practice will mature social work and solidify its place in society. This is a normal process of growth and one that requires patience when it concerns the development of scientific knowledge. Such knowledge can only be solidified when the profession reaches the stage of clear-cut domains of practice.

Social Work Practice as Science and Art

Bruner (1990) spoke of two major ways by which we have knowledge: the logico-scientific and narrative (or stories). Professional knowledge of the logico-scientific variety is taught in universities and tested in licensing and certification exams. Each profession or semiprofession also has practical or craft knowledge learned on the job through the experience of applying the logico-scientific knowledge to particular patients in concrete situations and verified through narrative (Etzioni, 1969). However, professions and semiprofessions differ in the balance between experience (or “art”) and the logico-scientific knowledge. It is the craft—and the mechanisms by which knowledge is applied—that often distinguishes overlapping but distinct fields. The physician's two forms of knowledge differs from that of a nurse's (Hughes, 1971) or that of the chiropractic doctor or the occupational therapist, although all four use the same basic sciences of biology, anatomy, and physiology, whereas that of the social worker is even further different. In social work, a large part of expertise is based on refined experience (art) and less on logico-science.

The seemingly improvisational nature of social work may be attributed to the fact that social work is very much a science and an art and is exacerbated by the fact of those without social work training performing social work tasks. The field of social work offers a scientifically derived knowledge base from which practitioners can operate.

Those who have not been educated and trained to be social workers, however, may have developed an art but may in fact be “improvising” in much of their work because they do not have the knowledge to guide their practice; they have not had the opportunity to learn the science. The art of social work—employed by both trained social workers and those not educated but serve as social workers—is difficult (if not impossible) to measure and quantify. What may seem to be improvised may actually be calculated and deliberate; the problem is that we do not have adequate tools to systematically evaluate the art of social work.

In attempting to increase scientification of “what works,” there may be a risk of overemphasizing quantitative evidence and underexamining qualitative study. The art, or craft, knowledge in social work practice is not easily quantified for transmission and replication. Typically, the researcher is devoted to generating logico-scientific knowledge, whereas the clinician concentrates on craft knowledge. Mattingly (1991) conducted an action research project to identify the role that storytelling plays in making sense of one’s work. Occupational therapists (OTs) were shown a videotape of an occupational therapist with a patient; the participating OTs then interpreted what they saw in story form. In contrast with their “chart talk” (a logico-scientific form of presentation that OTs use in formal medical settings), the storytelling (narrative form) put the experience of the patient and the OTs experience working with the patient center stage. In this study, the OTs learned more about their practice and flexibility in responding to patient contingencies through shared narratives than they had with logico-scientific measures. Social work puts an even greater emphasis on narrative form over the chart.

Often we assume that that there is only one truth and that every social worker ought to arrive at the same meaning and conclusion of every situation when faced with the same client. Yet each individual client and social worker pair develops specific narratives. Irvine (1999) understood narratives or stories from a sociological perspective:

The narrative concept of self that I use here is not so much a matter of people making up stories as it is of stories making people. . . . The events of people’s lives are reshaped according to the storytelling norms of given situations, and, through telling and retelling, those stories become the events of those lives. The “truth” of an experience is what emerges from the telling. Moreover, the stories will depend on the institutions within which you are embedded, as well as the resources that you bring to the telling. Institutions impart guidelines or formulas for what constitute acceptable stories. People reshape their experiences to fit. (p. 2)

There is no single social work intervention that can be effectively applied with all clients, by all clinicians, in all cases. Rather, the impact of the social work intervention depends on the individual client and worker—and the dynamics between the two parties. This is true for all target populations, regardless of whether it is clinical social work, group work, community practice, or even policy making. With scientification’s concentration on statistical analysis of quantitative data, we may miss the rich knowledge derived from narrative data.

There are other challenges to developing empirically-based knowledge in social work. The random assignment model in experimental intervention research assumes that different types of programs are, or should be, equally effective with all types of persons; it is a “one-size-fits-all” assumption. Researchers attempt to control by statistical means, such as regression analysis, and the effect of background characteristics of the clients in different program types. Of course, this requires that the researchers decide ahead of time which background characteristics are likely to prove important. In the process, they may miss some characteristics that would have been important to include. In addition, such studies require large sample sizes to produce statistically significant results. Such challenges in experimental research are particularly salient for social work intervention studies.

Typically, the experimental design is not able to control for the effects of worker-client dynamics and client characteristics that are not clearly defined, understood, or measurable. The design does not easily allow for individual idiosyncrasies common among social work cases, workers, and clients. Threats to confidentiality may also arise as one probes into the background of programs’ clients. Because of diversity in social work and characteristics among the populations utilizing social work services, and because of stigma associated with many conditions for which individuals receive social work intervention, large sample sizes are frequently difficult to obtain.

Another problem with overquantifying social work lies in the source of success. Take, for example, case-work or therapy. For decades, psychologists and social workers alike have tried to develop more effective methods of intervention. However, careful research has shown that there is little difference in outcome across different forms of psychotherapy. Rosenzweig (1936) referred to this as the “dodo bird’s verdict,” alluding to the *Alice in Wonderland* tale, in which the dodo bird judged that everyone had won the race and deserved a prize, the inference being that all forms of psychotherapy “win a prize” for being effective, when in fact their

outcomes are being determined by underlying common factors rather than the intervention itself. In essence, the random error in assessing success is large enough to obscure any real impact.

Luborsky and colleagues (2002) analyzed 17 meta-analyses comparing psychotherapeutic interventions and found that the differences between them were non-significant and effect sizes were small, leading to the conclusion that the dodo bird verdict was “alive and well” (p. 2). Another review of a 100 psychotherapy studies found that common factors accounted for 30% of therapeutic change as compared to 15% for technique factors (Lambert, 2001). The persistence and magnitude of these findings has now prompted the American Psychological Association to establish a task force to address the issue of structure and process in relation to clinical outcomes (Norcross, 2001). Therefore, there appears to be a confluence of factors that should be incorporated into any impact assessment, including the process of care, therapeutic alliance, rapport between therapist and client, personal characteristics, the environment, and so on. Although such studies are the norm and of special concern in clinical care, this is not the case in group work, community practice, or policy making, where the presumed causes of success are rarely studied.

Evolution and Erosion

To continue to move toward scientification and professionalization of social work, three interdependent sectors of the field—practice, education, and research—must all subscribe to this task and consistently strive toward these goals. At the same time, however, that social work is evolving and developing in theory, knowledge, education, and practice, factors unique to and currently inherent within the field hinder our ability to move forward. Social work struggles to be recognized and respected as a profession, while we simultaneously erode our distinct identity. With individuals who have no formal social work training or education performing social work roles, there are problems with identity and consistency, in addition to a lack of scientific knowledge in the field. What is social work, exactly, if it requires no particular expertise? Why would an individual pursue social work degree if it is not a prerequisite for social work positions? Without professional association or licensure, those performing social work jobs are not held to standards of practice or professional ethics.

Perhaps because of social work’s origins as a voluntary field and/or the low social status of the populations with whom social workers work (traditionally, social workers

serve those in need caused by vulnerability associated with poverty, oppression, discrimination, illness, abuse, or old or young age), the field tends to lack respect and value in relation to other professions. Social work, typically, does not generate income and is not a lucrative profession. In fact, since its inception and until the 1950s, social work was geared exclusively toward helping the poor and, if possible, alleviating poverty. When it became possible that the government would care for the poor (a myth that was never realized), social work developed new fronts. Regarding the 1950s and 1960s, Mapes (2004) noted: “Social workers in search of a place in this new family-centered culture argued that they should serve all because social and psychological problems knew no class boundaries” (p. 24). This expansion from serving the poor only and focusing on bringing them to the fold to providing middle-class America with therapy services changed—and obscured—the focus of the profession (Walkowitz, 1999).

Today in the United States, most often social workers are employed within nonprofit organizations serving individuals in the lower strata of income and wealth. Yet many social workers have private practices that offer individual, couples, group, or family therapy to those who can pay or for those with health insurance that covers such therapies. Even still, the social and human conditions and behaviors to which social workers respond—for example, violence, mental and physical illness, poverty, racism, crime, and delinquency—are those carrying stigma and dejection in society. Inherent characteristics of the field, therefore, make it difficult to garner and maintain respect, threatening the discipline’s evolution.

Within practice and academia, social work struggles to achieve or maintain professional status. Although we now have an academic focus and knowledge base uniquely dedicated to the study and practice of social work, there continues to be a perception that social work is not a unique discipline but rather a derivative of a various other fields, as Flexner (1915) argued. Within academic universities, social work lacks the visibility and esteem of other professional programs such as medicine, law, dentistry, education, and business. In fact, the United States is currently seeing a trend toward schools of social work losing their independent status and being subsumed under other departments or schools. For example, the University of California, Los Angeles, houses their MSW program in the Department of Social Welfare, School of Public Affairs; the University of Vermont offers their MSW through the Department of Social Work in the College of Education and Social Services; and the MSW program at Chicago State

University is found in the Department of Social Work and Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences. At our own institution, the University of Pennsylvania, we recently expanded the former School of Social Work to include additional degree programs not related to social work and changed the name to the School of Social Policy & Practice.

Social workers, and social work educators, in today's climate must be able to operate not only within their own discipline but also in association and coordination with other fields. There is no federal or major grant-making agency in the United States dedicated solely to the study of social work, as there is for nursing, criminology, mental health, and others. Researchers, therefore, frequently find that they need to tailor their work to have relevance for other fields. Social work is, by its nature, interdisciplinary and does incorporate knowledge from fields of psychology, sociology, biology, and others. In its application of science and art and in its professional standards and ethics, however, social work is a distinct discipline. In the search for scientification of social work, we may be denying the very nature of the work we are suppose to do and the chance to reach new frontiers.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have demonstrated, social work in the United States has evolved during the past century from friendly visitors, settlement houses, and charity organization societies that aimed at systematic care for the needy and indigent. It was a field of work that moved from using altruistic volunteers to establishing positions for paid professionals. Evolving in the midst of the quest for scientific explanation and problem solving of the progressive era, social work almost instantaneously sought status as a profession. However, such a status is often the result of many centuries of professional maturity, as in the case of law and medicine, and society's recognition that it cannot do without these professions. Since Flexner's famous speech in 1915, social work, regardless of its infant stage as a profession, has sought to form a solid knowledge base that can serve as a foundation. But such a knowledge base cannot be rushed. A profession needs to experience its domain, its practices, its mission, and its power over society in a lengthy, ongoing process. In our view, social work has established an impressive code of ethics and many specialties but has not yet fully reached a basic unifying scientific knowledge base.

It is our view that three factors, each with a polarity, present a hindrance to social work's current quest for a full professional scientific base. First, social work is both a type of work and a discipline—it is a diverse field involving practice in a variety of societal sectors and includes social workers doing work not exclusively considered social work and non-social workers filling social work roles. Second, social work is both an art and a science—success is not entirely based on repeated scientific methods but often is predicated on the idiosyncratic narrative that a social worker and client jointly formed. And finally, the field of social work is facing, simultaneously, evolution and erosion. The identity of social workers and their ability to explain what it is that makes them unique and what the boundaries of the young profession are, makes it both a challenge and a source of opportunity, but it also it enables erosion and retreat.

We are not as pessimistic as Stoesz (2002), who called social work's performance "desultory" (p. 19) and stated:

Empirically testable theory is a rigorous and expensive process; nonetheless, it is the *sine qua non* of the modern professions. Yet, social work has disregarded this prescription. Not only has social work tended to borrow its theory from other disciplines, it rarely mounts its own experimental studies. Worse, much of the profession has embarked on a post-modernist "futulism," a venture that is nothing less than the defenestration of the Enlightenment. It is worth remembering that social work originated contemporaneously with other social sciences—indeed, it was integral with sociology and survey research during the Progressive era—but the profession's theory and methods are, by comparison, anemic today. (p. 29)

The call in social work, as in other fields, today is for evidence-based practice. This is a most notable goal and one that we wholeheartedly embrace. But what does it mean to be empirically based when the profession is in such an evolutionary stage? We suspect that social work, in the near future, can reach a stage in which macro evaluations are of value. If clinical psychology and psychotherapy are finding themselves at base point when they compare the efficacy of various modes of intervention, we should focus inward on the nexus between the helper and the client.

We believe in a modest version of evidence-based practice, one that is based on accountability and respect for the client and society. Gibbs and Gambrill (2002; based on Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000) suggested five stages of using knowledge in social work practice, with which we concur. First, when a client visits a social worker, the social worker should assess the client's needs as a well-formed question

describing the client, course of action, alternative course or courses of action, and intended results. Second, the social worker should search existing knowledge or literature as to how best to proceed. The third task for the social worker is to assess the relevance of the available knowledge to the client seeking help. Fourth, the worker should translate the available relevant data into an action plan and carry it out. Finally, it is imperative that the social worker evaluate outcomes and make sure that the intervention meets the intended goals.

This approach is a necessary step between accountability and the formation of a professional knowledge base. Although it may be premature to strive for an overarching knowledge that can feed social work in all its formations and evolutionary stages, it cannot serve as an excuse to avoid careful evidence-based practice. Any practicing social worker is required to set relevant outcome goals, search for best practices, choose a logical action plan, and, most importantly, assess outcome. An ongoing feedback of outcome evaluation at the individual social worker level is as high as we can aim, but it is way up and bound to produce important new insights and, in the very long future, will serve as a base of generating overarching knowledge.

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