

DOCTORAL RESEARCH AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

by

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The topic of this symposium -- doctoral research and its connection to the practice of social work -- is one of the most important issues facing doctoral education in social work and social welfare. The issue raises two major questions: to what extent does doctoral research contribute to the knowledge base for social work practice? And, how can the contribution of doctoral research to practice be enhanced?

One objective that is common, I believe, to all doctoral programs in social work and social welfare is to prepare students to make original contributions to the knowledge base for social work practice through the conduct of scholarly research. Programs differ greatly in the priority and rigor they give to this objective, but all doctoral programs have as one of their objectives the preparation of research scholars to conduct research that will advance the knowledge base of the field. Thus, the question, to what extent is this objective achieved, is pertinent to all doctoral programs, despite the many differences among doctoral programs in other respects.

To begin a discussion of the relationship between doctoral research and social work practice it is necessary first to have some shared definitions of the different types of research-generated knowledge and their relative utility or applicability for social work practice.

Social work practice is concerned with inducing changes selectively in systems to achieve desired objectives regarding human needs and problems. This definition of social work practice calls attention to an element common to all definitions of social work, namely that social workers intervene in order to make a difference. If social workers' interventions do not make a difference for the persons, families, organizations, or communities for which they are intended, then what is the justification for these interventions? It needs to be recognized, however, that in some instances the changes introduced by the social worker are quite modest, as in those situations where the social worker's objective is to prevent further deterioration in the client's condition, an important outcome that may not be apparent to the naive observer, but a change nonetheless from what otherwise would have been a negative outcome.

It follows from their mission to induce change, that social workers have a need for knowledge in three broad areas. The first need is for knowledge about social and human problems including their nature, correlates, and incidence. Most of the research conducted in this area is either descriptive or explanatory in character. Descriptive research defines the phenomena of interest and seeks to identify distinctive characteristics or patterns identified with particular persons, systems or problems. An example is the research on the nature and extent of child abuse. Explanatory research overlaps descriptive research but also goes beyond it to search for causal or at least correlational relationships between the phenomena of interest and other variables, such as the relationship between social class and delinquency or the economic correlates of community disintegration. Explanatory research seeks to answer the question, "why?" Social scientists tend to call this kind of research "basic" research, but that characterization is no longer accepted by many social work researchers.

A second need of social work practitioners is for knowledge that will inform the selection of intervention goals and objectives. For the most part, this knowledge need is filled by the values of the social work profession, such as self-determination and maximum realization of capacities and opportunities. Increasingly, emphasis is placed on helping clients define their own objectives. Values cannot be created, nor can their validity be

tested by research. However, research can shed light on the consequences or impact of value choices, such as the choice between various levels of financial assistance. In addition, research that generates normative data about behavior can be useful in assessing the feasibility of alternative intervention objectives, and identify the conditions that are conducive to the achievement of objectives as well as the obstacles to achieving them. And research can shed light on the consequences of goal attainment.

The third need of the practitioner is for knowledge that will increase the effectiveness of social work interventions including knowledge about the conditions and procedures under which specific desired changes can be achieved -- in other words, research on the relative effectiveness and utility of alternative intervention methods and techniques.

It should be noted that there are other categories of knowledge needed in social work that have not been included here because their contribution to practice is less direct. Examples would include studies on the history of social work and social welfare, and research on social work education. Obviously these are important knowledge areas, but not for their direct and immediate contribution to practice improvement.

What is the relative usefulness of these three areas of knowledge for social work practice? And, what priority should be assigned to each of these areas for the allocation of research talent and resources in social work? Before addressing those questions, it is important to understand why priorities need to be established. First, research resources in social work are limited. How many social workers are devoting a significant fraction of their efforts to the conduct of research? While the exact number is not known, an optimistic estimate would be not more than 1,200, probably less -- a very small number. The number of doctoral graduates each year also is small: approximately 225 per year currently. Second, the scope of social work and social welfare is vast, so that the array of possible research topics is extremely large relative to the resources available. Consequently a clear sense of priorities is essential and should inform the education of research scholars for the field.

As noted earlier, in addition to the three areas identified in which knowledge is needed for practice (social and human problems, objectives and goals, and interventions), I added an "other" category to include areas of research that are important but less directly related to the improvement practice, such as the history of social work and social welfare and social work education. In considering the relative priorities to be placed on these research areas, I want to set aside this "other" category. This category includes important research areas, but their link to practice is indirect and not immediate, and even taken together, they account for only a small proportion of the research conducted in social work. I also want to set aside the goals and objectives area. As noted earlier, this knowledge area consists primarily of the values to which the profession is committed and against which specific objectives and intervention methods are tested. Nevertheless, as noted above, research can make useful contributions in this area.

Thus, I will limit this discussion of priorities to the remaining two areas: descriptive-explanatory research on persons, systems and problems and research on intervention. It turns out that these two areas, taken together, account for most of the dissertations completed by social work doctoral students in one recent year. Which of these research areas is most likely to make the most direct and immediately useful contributions to practice? Both areas are perceived to be relevant by social work

researchers.

Research on persons, systems and problems includes a wide range of topics, from the effect of stress on the behavior of adolescents, the changing roles of women, and patterns in the utilization of services by ethnic minorities, to the effects of organizational size and structure on practitioners. Despite the almost unlimited range of topics that could be studied in this knowledge area, there are two commonalities. First, this research typically is conducted within the tradition of conventional social science research. Put differently, most if not all of the research conducted in this area could have been conducted by social scientists. In fact, there is considerable overlap, with a substantial amount of research of this type by social scientists on many of the same topics studied by social workers. The underlying commonality is in the questions asked, namely: what are the characteristics of the phenomena (e.g., the social problem) and how can it be explained? The second commonality is that because of the nature of the questions addressed in this type of research, the application of findings for this research to practice is indirect and speculative at best. The reason is that answers to descriptive and explanatory questions are descriptive and causal, and they therefore do not provide answers to the question of what interventions will change the problem, person or system in the direction desired. Thus, for example, reports on explanatory research typically address intervention -- if they do at all -- in a section frequently called "implications for practice." What is said about practice implications is unavoidably inferential and speculative, because such studies do not provide direct data on intervention variables and their effects.

One important exception to this generalization is that some research of this type may have direct applications to preventive intervention. For example, if research finds that certain birth defects are caused by alcohol abuse by the mother, this has a direct application to preventive practice if there are interventions capable of reducing or eliminating alcohol abuse among mothers at risk. However, it is critical to recognize that even research as pertinent as this does not, and in fact cannot, reveal what would be an effective intervention to achieve that objective, for example, how to reduce alcohol abuse, which is not a simple task. That question requires research on possible interventions, or what I have called here intervention research.

Despite these limitations, there is no intent here to diminish the importance of descriptive-explanatory research. On the contrary, it is valuable to social work for several reasons including:

- (1) surveying a new or emerging problem or topic of concern;
- (2) calling attention to a problem that is new or has been ignored;
- (3) providing to social workers the comfort that comes with feeling that they "understand" a problem or situation;
- (4) the possibility that findings will suggest a possible direction for intervention that eventually proves to be effective.

Intervention research is research that seeks to evaluate the relative effectiveness of interventions directed to the problems and objectives of concern to social workers. The term intervention includes the full range of social work interventions, from those applied in clinical practice, to community organization, administration, and policy practice. Thus, for

example, research in this area includes the impact of policy options since policies are interventions. A variety of tools are used in intervention research, including: evaluation research, single-system research, policy impact analysis, the emerging concept of developmental research which is focused on the intervention design, and utilization of more effective intervention methods and techniques.

Intervention research has several characteristics that are pertinent to the interests of practitioners and social work researchers. First, the results of intervention research usually are directly transferable to practice, without the need for speculative inferences. Second, intervention research is not likely to be conducted for social work by other disciplines, at least not for the problems of central concern to social workers. Third, within the developmental research framework, intervention research can lead directly to practice improvement. Finally, the nature of intervention research encourages the participation of practitioners in knowledge development. Taken together, these characteristics constitute a strong argument that intervention research, and especially developmental research, should have the highest priority in the utilization of research talent and resources in social work.

How do priorities compare to current patterns in doctoral research? To address that question, I reviewed all the doctoral dissertations that were abstracted for one year, selected randomly, from the four years from 1980 to 1984, and classified them according to the research typology outlined earlier. For the year reviewed, 162 dissertations were reported. The distribution of the dissertations among the categories in the research typology are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
DISTRIBUTION OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS BY TYPE OF RESEARCH  
1982-83

| <u>Type</u>                | <u>Frequency</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Descriptive-explanatory:   |                  |                |
| Persons, Systems, Problems | 122              | 75.3           |
| Social Work Intervention   | 26               | 16.0           |
| History                    | 6                | 3.7            |
| Social Work Education      | 4                | 2.5            |
| Clinical Judgment          | 3                | 1.9            |
| International              | 1                | 0.6            |
| Total                      | 162              | 100.0          |

As Table 1 indicates, seventy five percent of the dissertations fit the

descriptive-explanatory category. Many of the abstracts in this category do not refer to social work at all or do not suggest any implications for intervention. Only 26 of the 162 dissertations or 16 percent, could be classified as intervention studies. And some of these studies were quite far afield; an example is a study of the effectiveness of a program to train clerical workers.

The priorities implicit in the distribution of dissertations shown in Table 1 need to be modified significantly in the direction of a substantially increased emphasis on intervention research for the following reasons. First, if practitioners are to increase their utilization of research, then greater emphasis needs to be given to research that is directly transferable to practice. Second, if practitioners are to engage in research, alone or as collaborators, there is a need to conduct more research that they find useful and pertinent. Third, it is important to concentrate the limited research talent and resources in social work on those problems and knowledge needs that other disciplines will not address, and to rely increasingly on related disciplines for descriptive-explanatory research on persons, systems and problems. Fourth, we need to recognize that descriptive-explanatory research may or may not have immediate utility for practice. Causal research can be very costly, often takes an exceedingly long time, and yields results of uncertain, perhaps even no direct application to practice. The question of utility for practice needs to be addressed when undertaking such research. Finally, it should be recognized that applied research is just as important, and as difficult, as what has been called basic research.

What would we need to do to increase the investment of energy in intervention research in doctoral education? The following initiatives would help to increase the emphasis on intervention in doctoral research.

1. Engage doctoral students in analysis of the applicability to practice of the various types of research and of the importance of intervention research in social work and social welfare.
2. Give increased emphasis and attention to intervention research, including developmental research, in all curriculum areas of doctoral programs.
3. Convey to doctoral students the concept that applied research is just as important and valuable and requires as much skill and sophistication as "basic" research. In short, both are "basic" research, and they differ only in the nature of the questions being asked.
4. Encourage careful attention to the potential for practice applications in the formulation and design of dissertation proposals.
5. Provide opportunities and encouragement for doctoral students to conduct evaluative and developmental research on social work interventions.
6. Design conferences and colloquia with research and practitioners on the practice applications of doctoral research.

## Conclusion

The mission of social work practitioners is to bring about desired changes in persons, systems and problems in order to enhance the quality of life for all persons. In every level and nearly all fields in which social workers practice, their effectiveness is less than they or their clients need them to be. Although there are many areas in social work and social welfare in which additional knowledge is needed, the highest priority in social work research should be given to research designed to increase the effectiveness of practice.

A closer partnership between research and practice could help give needed focus to the work of social work research scholars and bring to practitioners a view of research as a source of information that can enhance their own effectiveness. The most important outcome, however, would be the benefits that more effective services would bring to those persons social workers seek to serve.