

The Relationship Between Self-Advocacy and Self-Concept Among College Students with Disabilities

Eileen Taylor Appleby, Ph.D.

Statement of the Research Problem

For many years, the profession of social work has grappled with defining and operationalizing the concept of advocacy. A review of social work literature, spanning a 25 year period from 1965 to 1990, reveals 18 different definitions and a wide range of conceptualizations of advocacy. The definitions indicate a broad scope of behaviors, roles, and methods for the advocate. Included in the literature is a wealth of information on the technical aspects of advocacy such as how it is done, when it is done, and with whom. As with the literature related to the definition of advocacy, there is little empirical data supporting the ideas of what one does to advocate and how the practitioner functions as an advocate.

Research Background

The empirical findings of McGowan (1974), Epstein (1981), and Schinke, Barth, and Blythe (1985) support earlier literature (Grosser, 1965; Thursz, 1966; Brager, 1967; Sunley, 1970; Riley, 1971; Panitch; 1974 and Austin et.al, 1986) which identifies the common themes of a specialized knowledge base, communication skills, and the use of assertive tactics for the advocate.

This review of the literature substantiates McGowan's (1987) comment on early writings on advocacy as, ". . . exhortative and somewhat polemical in nature" (p. 89). McGowan (1987) further observes that although advocacy is now frequently mentioned in social work practice text books, there have been few articles in social work literature on the theoretical examination or empirical investigation of advocacy.

Additionally, this body of literature made up of both empirical evidence and practice wisdom (Reid & Smith, 1981), often *implies* that there is a relationship between self-concept and the ability to advocate for self. However, there is no empirical evidence which uses a standardized self-concept instrument to substantiate that point of view, nor is there any theoretical orientation which attempts to conceptualize self-advocacy in a measurable manner.

Questions/Hypotheses

In order to ascertain the components of self-advocacy, the following research questions were posited in order to provide some evidence to judge the validity of the concept of self-advocacy:

1. Are those who self-advocate more knowledgeable about their impairment than those who do not self-advocate?
2. Are those who self-advocate more accepting of their disability than those who do not self-advocate?
3. Are those who self-advocate more knowledgeable about available services than those who do not self-advocate?
4. Are those who self-advocate more assertive than those who do not self-advocate?
5. Is there a relationship between the ability to advocate for self and self-concept?

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to create a model of self-advocacy and to examine a possible relationship between self-advocacy and self-esteem. The subjects were college students with disabilities. A convenience sample of 182 college students with disabilities aged 18 and above was surveyed. Data on 2 groupings of independent variables were obtained: (1) demographic (sex, age, race, year in college, living locale, and living arrangement) and (2) components of self-advocacy (knowledge of impairment, perception of impairment, knowledge of services, and assertion). A scale to measure perception of impairment was developed by the researcher and based on the work of Weinberg & Williams (1978). Assertion was measured by the Assertion Inventory (Gambrill & Richey, 1975). The dependent variable, self-concept, was measured by the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. A factor analysis (varimax rotation; eigenvalues ≥ 2.0) of the Revised Perception of Disability Scale was performed in order to determine number of subscales. In order to determine the internal consistency of the items of the 2 factors which emerged Cronbach's alpha was performed. The statistical approach used to determine the best self-advocacy model for predicting self-concept was multiple regression.

Results

Data indicates that 62% of the students with disabilities rated themselves as having average or above self-concept. The mean scores for the total Self-Concept ($X = 47.5$; $sd = 10.1$), Self-Satisfaction ($X = 52.5$; $sd = 10.1$), Behavior ($X = 45.4$; $sd = 10.7$), Moral/Ethical Self ($X = 52.2$; $sd = 10.4$), Personal Self ($X = 51.5$; $sd = 11.5$), and Family Self ($X = 45.6$; $sd = 11.2$) are well within the normative range of 45T to 55T. The scores for Identity ($X = 43.4$; $sd = 10.3$) and Physical Self ($X = 41$; $sd = 11.7$) are below average. A statistically significant association exists between self-concept and one factor of perception of impairment ($F=14$, $p < .0001$), wish ($F=8.56$, $p < .01$), and assertion ($F=12.3$, $p < .0001$). Step-wise and

forced entry multiple regressions were used to examine the effects of demographic and self-advocacy components on total self-concept and the 8 subscales of self-concept. Sex, age, and year in college as well as knowledge of impairment, role of disability in life, wish, and assertion emerge in one or more of the self-concept scales as having a bearing on self-concept (Figure 2).

Utility for Social Work Practice

The model for self-advocacy put forth in this research provides empirical information about the components of advocacy thereby contributing to an understanding of the skills necessary to practice advocacy. The model contributes a blueprint for assessment for the social work practitioner by providing an empirical foundation for the information dealt with in practice. The types of information that the practitioner gathers has many levels and many sources. This research contributes to practice by furnishing a plan for gathering, processing and analyzing and interpreting data from a single client or group of clients. This is particularly helpful in looking for associations and repetitious patterns of effective and ineffective behavior. The self-advocacy model would be especially beneficial in target problem scaling when the problem is identified and understood. The self-advocacy model would be very helpful in clarification of the problem and advantageous for focusing discussion. The model would be invaluable in work were self-advocacy has been identified through a goal statement. The model identifies goal areas for assessment.

The self-advocacy model presented here is "user friendly" research for the social work practitioner. Since the 1970's when Fischer (1973) asked the question, "is psychotherapy effective?" the debate about the role of empiricism in the social work profession has been extensive (Tripodi, 1974; Hudson, 1978; Heineman, 1981; Siegel, 1984; Ivanoff et.al, 1987; Hopps & Gambrill, 1988; Allen-Mears & Lane, 1990; O'Hare, 1991). Seidle (1980) stated that researchers need to communicate effectively so that findings could be used in practice. Schilling et al, (1985) maintained that scholarly study did not always address practitioner needs. This research claims to meet practitioners' need and calls for uncomplicated means of measurement to assess client needs, evaluate client progress, and measure clinical outcomes. In addition, the self-advocacy model lends itself to utilization for purposes of accountability to clients, organizations, communities and funding bodies as well as evaluation of social work practice. As a result, this research makes a convincing contribution toward "strengthening the profession's scholarship."

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