



TOWARDS PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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The paper stresses the need for the social work profession to develop a research paradigm that is humane and holistic and maintains a balance between exploratory research and confirmatory research and, between qualitative research and quantitative research. It is recommended that special importance may be given to practice-based research in the MSW curriculum so that practitioners can link research to practise. Finally, such a research curriculum is proposed in this paper, with its goals, objectives, scope and essential components of course work, field exercises and research seminars.

INTRODUCTION

The paper stresses the need for the social work profession to develop a research paradigm that is humane and holistic and maintains a balance between exploratory research and confirmatory research and, between qualitative research and quantitative research. It is recommended that special importance may be given to practice-based research in the MSW curriculum so that practitioners can link research to practise. Finally, such a research curriculum is proposed in this paper, with its goals, objectives, scope and essential components of course work, field exercises and research seminars.

NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Traditionally, the ideal in social work research has been logical positivism/empiricism and Popper's hypothetic-deductive model. According to positivism, there is an external world and the external world determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing. According to the hypothetic-deductive model, theories are tested by deriving testable hypothesis from them. According to this model, everything in this universe can be explained in terms of causality (Kirk & Miller, 1986). This dominant paradigm assumes quantitative measurement, experimental design and multivariate parametric Mariscal analysis to the epitome of "good" science (Patton, 1978).

Social scientists have come to recognise in recent years that hypotheses testing is appropriate to only a small proportion of the questions they ask and most of such "confirmatory" research prevents discovery (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Statistical techniques require assumptions that are difficult to satisfy. Quantitative measurement is also criticised

to dehumanise the substance of social research (Mullen, 1985). Klein pointed out, way back in 1970, that (quantitative) social research methods are inappropriate to social work because of the tendency to develop categories or labels and force the findings to fits them, when people and their problems do not fit nearly into cubbyholes. Klein further opined that social work practice deals with complex and multi-faceted relationship whereas social researchers like to examine single or at best small numbers of variables at one time.

The heuristic approach is a less ambitious paradigm that breaks away from the traditional hypothetic-deductive model of research. It emphasizes science as a discovery approach rather than a confirmatory approach. It uses both quantitative as well as qualitative methods. However, the emphasis is on contextual description and the elevation of the "inside view" which is more consistent with a qualitative epistemological stance. Inferential statistics or similar methods arriving at broad generalizations are deem-phased. Bias and objectivity in such an approach are dealt with by studying as many vantage points as possible (Mullen, 1985).

The heuristic formulation has stimulated the social work community to re-examine the regulative principles controlling scientific work. According to Haworth (1984), social work requires a knowledge base that comes from experiencing and understanding the single reality of "knowledge, values and action" that is characteristic of the human situation, Haworth reported on a London-based group called the New Paradigm Research Group which has been vigorously investigating research methods that break away entirely with a positivist heritage. The unilateral hypotheses testing is rejected as dehumanizing and an attempt is made to create techniques for involving research subjects as co-researchers, whose interests, values and desires are central to

all stages of the investigation, resulting in participatory research. Their efforts are towards responsible social work practice and aspirations are for "new rigour of softness" to make research more human and practice more visible within that same process. In fact, Haworth sees the particular in the ideal position to be a researcher for knowledge as the utility and meaning of the behaviours must be gained from involvement in the ongoing lives of human beings.

According to Ruckdeschel (1985), the qualitative perspective is more relevant for social work because both have similar assumptions about human behaviour. As a result, this approach is useful to synthesize social theory, practice and research, using research as the lead system.

The paradigm of qualitative research derived from the tradition of anthropological field studies, relies on holistic analysis and detailed description derived from close contacts with the targets of the study. It uses the holistic inductive strategy, in that, the researcher attempts to make sense of the situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the research setting. Theories about what is happening in a programme are grounded in this programme experience, rather than imposed on the programme a priori, based on hypothetico-deductive construction (Patton, 1980).

In conclusion, the social work profession needs to develop a research paradigm that emphasizes humane and holistic approach, and maintain a balance between exploratory research and confirmatory research and between qualitative methods and quantitative methods. What is equally important that research and social work practice be integrated.

IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

Austin (1979) observed that the legitimization of the social work profession has depended on social utility rather than on its scientific base; that the domain of social work has, in fact, continued to expand throughout the 20th century without a unified scientific base. He concluded that social work is a profession based on organized practitioner wisdom and is and probably will not be, a truly science-based profession in the foreseeable future. Austin, therefore, inferred that the major function of research in social work is not theory building or theory testing in the scientific model; that the major contribution of research to practice is to be made through the systematic study of practice.

Powers, Meenaghan and Toomey (1985) highlight the need for a practitioner to make informed decisions. These decisions and subsequent practice behaviours are precisely the types of things that professionals should justify. They stressed that the ultimate test of effective knowledge building in any profession is the degree to which the body of knowledge is prescriptive.

Evaluation research, single system designs and developmental research are different research approaches that are practice-based. Evaluation research gained increased importance in social work, in the 1970's, as a tool to ascertain accountability of social work organizations and programmes. On the other hand, single system designs and developmental research, both which contain the element of evaluation, are relatively recent developments in social work research.

Single system design facilitates a formative type of evaluation of with a system, be it an individual, family, group organisation, community or other collectivity. The heart of single-system designs is collecting repeated information on the target problem alike time series research. Unlike other

forms of research, single system designs often rely heavily on purely visual analysis of changes in the data rather than on complicated statistics. Some simple statics may be applied. (Bloom and Fischer, 1982).

Thomas (1978) observed that at best, social workers view the culmination of research as the drawing of conclusions from research findings that may have implications for social work, or be worthy of utilization research, rather than as the generation of interventional or other social innovations that direct applications in the social technology of social work. He further noted that social work has been slow to recognise that its social technology is subject to systematic rather than incidental and haphazard alteration and that social work researchers and others in social work can participate actively in its generation rather than to leave such development to others outside the field.

Thomas described social technology as the technical means by which social work objectives are achieved, and noted that conventional research methods are not well suited to the task of developing new social technology. For this purpose, he developed the paradigm of developmental research, which is a combination of the models of research and development and research utilization. Analysis, development and evaluation comprise the phases of research and development and, diffusion and adoption are the phases for research utilization.

Because the education of social work research has traditionally been modelled on pure social research, students of the professional course are trained for research which can tell one the state of things as they are, than research that aims at bettering them. Social work students fail to see its direct link to practice. As a result of such a training, most of the social workers think that they have nothing to do with research. Such a training makes social workers poor researchers and poor users of research in the practice situation.

PROPOSAL FOR A RESEARCH CURRICULUM FOR MSW STUDENTS

Although social work research was one of the eight areas required for accreditation even before the establishment of a standard two-year graduate programme in the USA and the research thesis was made an obligatory component in most social work master's programmes and became a mandatory requirement in the accreditation standards established by the Council on Social Work Education as early as in 1952 (Bernard, 1977), the research training offered to social work students has hardly had any relevance to practice. Few social work writers have recommended models to make the research curriculum practice-based.

According to Briar (1979), effective integration of research into the education of clinical practitioners should produce a clinical scientist who: (1) uses with his or her clients the practice methods and techniques that are known empirically to be most effective; (2) continuously and rigorously evaluates his or her own practice; (3) participates in the discovery, testing and reporting of more effective ways of helping clients; (4) uses untested, unvalidated practice methods and techniques cautiously and only with adequate control, evaluation and attention to client rights; and (5) communicates the results of his or her evaluation of practice to others.

Briar developed a research-practice model to train clinical social work students for research-practice with the help of single-subject designs. He also required his students to conduct clinical research on their cases in the field. One of

the most important outcomes of the course, according to Briar, was that by about the sixth or the seventh week of the class, students could no longer maintain a distinct and clear separation between research and practice.

Shurman (1979) also recommended training of social work students for single-case designs through the research course and the research exercise/ practicum. He suggested that the student's practice with each case ought to be evaluated through single-case designs and collections of cases from many students might be used by faculty and students for the exploration of treatment issues through research design. Such approach would make students dependent on research.

Goals : Discussion of various approaches of social work research and its education imply that the goal of the research curriculum for social work students should be to train them for a humane and holistic approach. First, to utilize research findings for practice; second, to assess accountability of their interventions, and third, to generate interventional innovations. These three goals may be viewed in increasing order of advancement in skills and, therefore, be made focus of the research curriculum at bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, respectively. A research curriculum is proposed below for the master's degree in social work. The curriculum comprises of objective, and scope, and the components of course content, field exercises and research seminars.

Objectives: The objectives of research training for MSW students may include the following :

1. To develop an attitude that research is an integral part of practice.
2. To obtain knowledge about the range of exploratory as well as confirmatory and qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies that can be used to assess accountability for social work intervention.
3. To learn to identify the problem for research in the field work settings and select the appropriate methodology to study the problem.
4. To develop skills in conducting social work research.
5. To learn to draw implications of research findings for policy making, intervention and further research.
6. To be able to read and assess research produced by others.

Scope : The different types of assessment interventions are described below according to the stage of the intervention. These stages are grouped into initiation stage, implementation stage and conclusion stage. The major components of the assessment are the problem situation, intervention and the outcome/expected outcome. The intervention may be done at the micro level. The assessment may comprise of qualitative as well as quantitative research. The clients may be treated as co-researchers at every stage.

A. Assessment at the Initiation Stage of Intervention

Assessment of program at initiation may be carried out in order to ascertain appropriateness of the objectives and the implementation plan for the programme (Epstein and Tripodi, 1979).

While assessing the plan of intervention, it is essential to ascertain that it is based on the actual and felt needs of the potential beneficiaries, depending upon their situation. Such baseline data may be obtained through *nud analysis*. Some objective criteria, to establish the need conditions for the specific intervention, will first have to be theoretically worked out, based on the expected outcome.

Developmental intervention may be needed by all the individuals in an age group, whereas specific outcome may have to be laid down for need for remedial intervention. According to Garter (1960), the need conditions may be those expressed by clients and those unexpressed by clients. For the needs expressed by the clients, they may or may not be utilizing the services.

At the stage of initiating a programme, it is also important to carry out a survey of similar programmes that may exist in the city. Gaps in these services indicate the need for extension or new services. If similar programmes are available, the need survey may also examine whether the potential beneficiaries are using these services. If they are not, the reasons may be examined.

A need analysis may be used in three major ways :

- (1) The scope of the programme may be planned according to the magnitude of people concluded as needing the intervention.
- (2) The characteristics of the people needing the intervention can be useful while planning the content of the intervention.
- (3) The difficulties people report in utilizing services of similar programmes are useful for planning the service delivery aspects of the programme.

At the stage of initiation of an intervention, a *resource survey* may also be carried out in the defined locality in order to complete information needed for providing information and referral services to the beneficiaries. Such a survey may explore number and types of services available, and provided by organization as well as individuals to meet a particular need. Criteria for intake of clientele for these services will also be important to examine in such a survey.

B. Assessment at the Implementation Stage of Intervention

According to Morris and Fitz-Gibbon (1978), formative evaluation of programme implementation is known as programme monitoring and summative evaluation of the same is known as programme documentation. They further specify monitoring often means assuming a role in the programme planning, development and refinement. It helps the staff and the planners to identify obstacles, implement changes and make additions to the programme as it develops.

Morris and Fitz-Gibbon describe programme documentation as useful for accountability, providing a lasting description of the programme and a list of the possible causes of the programme's effects.

Monitoring and documentation at the implementation stage may be carried out of (1) implementation of intervention with reference to the goals set and the plan formulated, (2) its utilization by the designated population, and (3) the satisfaction of the beneficiaries. It would also help to (4) analyse the problem, (5) ascertain the process of change and the intermediate outcome of the intervention and (6) review the relevant theories.

Different types of organizational studies and studies of service delivery systems may be carried out in order to assess the implementation of an intervention.

Through a service utilization study, one can ascertain the extent to which the designated target population is being reached. Such a study may identify difficulties in service utilization by people, such as lack of awareness, cultural or personal obstacles, long distance, transportation difficulties, service insufficient, strict intake criteria, etc.

Opinion/attitude studies for the intervention may assess service utilization as well as acceptance of the intervention. The targets for such studies may be the staff or the beneficiaries.

A periodic review of the case records of the agency is useful for several purposes: (1) Such a review is another way to examine whether the designated target population is reached by the programme; (2) it is useful to analyse the problems people come with; (3) it can show the trend in people's problem manifestations over a period of time; (4) the process of the practitioner's intervention can be examined through such a review; (5) the process of change and the intermediate outcome of the intervention can be analyzed through such a review. Such an analysis feeds into the documentation of the programme efforts that helps to study what led to the final outcome of the programme. A valuable outcome of such a review is that it also helps in arriving at an improved case recording system.

C. Assessment at the Conclusion Stage of Intervention

Assessment at the conclusion stage of an intervention is same as summative evaluation with reference to effectiveness and efficiency. Such an assessment will be useful for making improvements in the intervention approach, reviewing the theories behind the intervention and repeating or replicating the intervention.

Effectiveness of the intervention may be examined by comparing the outcome with the baseline data and the expected outcome. Rosen and Proctor (1979) have classified outcome into three types: (1) Intermediate outcomes which are presumed to contribute to or create a facilitative climate for continuation of the programme. Assessment of the intermediate outcome may be done at the implementation stage of the intervention. (2) Instrumental outcomes, which, when achieved, are assumed to lead necessarily to the achievement of the programme goals without the help of the programme; (3) Ultimate outcomes are indicators of achievement of the programme goals. The instrumental outcome may be assessed at the conclusion stage, whereas follow up study may be needed to assess the ultimate outcome of the intervention.

Efficiency of the intervention may be assessed by a cost benefit analysis of the outcome with reference to the resources or efforts put in.

Components: Course work, field exercise and research seminars may be essential components of a research curriculum. It is proposed that for MSW students, the research course may be offered for two semesters after the student has completed a semester of course work and some field work in the programme. Field exercises through their field work placement and research seminars may continue through the end of the programme.

Course Content: The content of the course on practice-based research for MSW students may be scheduled as follows:

1st Year 2nd semester

1. Scientific methods
2. Objectives and importance of practice-based research
3. Types of practice-based research
4. Types and reliance of research designs:
 - Exploratory and confirmatory designs
 - Quantitative and qualitative designs

5. Importance of pluralistic and participatory approaches in practice-based research.
6. Identification of a research problem in the field work setting covering the problem, intervention and the expected outcome of intervention.
7. Preparation of bibliography and review of literature.
8. Formulation and clarification of the research problem, objectives and key concepts.
9. Development of a theoretical perspective or a conceptual framework, identification of major variables and assumptions and framing of research questions or hypotheses.
10. Selection of an appropriate research and sample design

2nd Year 1st semester

- (1) Operationalization and preparation of research tools and measures of the problem, the intervention and the expected outcome.
- (2) Methods of primary data collection: Interviews and observation
- (3) Use of secondary data sources: Case records and organizational records
- (4) Data processing: Manual and computer
- (5) Quantitative data analysis: Levels of measurement, descriptive statistics, coding and tabulation and application of bivariate statistics
- (6) Qualitative data analysis
- (7) Graphic presentation.
- (8) Writing a case study
- (9) Data interpretation and report writing
- (10) Drawing implications of the findings for policy making, and intervention and further research

Field Exercise: The field exercise in research may be carried out by all the MSW students in their field work agencies. Towards the end of the first year, they may identify a simple research problem from the field work setting. The summer vacation may be used for literature review on the topic. The first semester of the second year may be spent on preparation of the research plan and proposal and tools and measures, appropriate to the problem identified. The mid-second year vacation may be used for sample selection and collection of data. The fourth semester may be used for qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Report writing may be started after the exams in the fourth semester and completed within two months, with implications for research utilization.

Research Seminars: Research seminars may be held one hour per week in small groups by the teachers of the research course and the research guides starting with the session in the course on identification of research problem from the field work setting, through the report writing stage. The goals of these seminars may be to integrate the teaching of the research course with students' field exercise in research, help students with their specific problems at different stages and let students learn by sharing with others.

The proposed curriculum may be tried out and improved upon. Simultaneous efforts will have to be made to base the teaching of method courses on research whenever possible. As Sherman (1979) cautioned, unless the practice teaching in the curriculum is empirically derived, no overlay of research courses will succeed in producing empirically oriented practitioners. The models of practice that are taught in class and field ought to be research-based. He suggested

that courses or systematic reviews of research literature in a particular field may also concentrate on making use of empirical findings to develop practice models in that findings to develop practice models in that field.

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