

Evaluation: A Faculty Member's Perspective on Continuing Education Programs

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Introduction

Social work practice has changed dramatically in the past twenty years. Agency privatization, managed health care, and conservative policies are just a few of the social factors influencing practice today. Funding has become more competitive, and most grants require evaluation of every aspect of programs. Evaluation research is the skill that social work agencies and practitioners must use to account for their resources and to justify their outcomes. This paper will discuss program and practice evaluation from an academic perspective, and the role of continuing education in maintaining and enhancing practitioner's evaluation skills.

Social Work Education: Our Historical and Current Approach to Evaluation Research

As Chair of the Research Sequence and a professor for both the BSW and MSW programs at Temple University's School of Social Administration, this author is invested in educating practitioners who are committed to, and confident in, their abilities to evaluate programs and their own practices. Social work educators should be guided by the fact that program and practice evaluation skills are becoming invaluable for today's practitioners. Twenty years ago, students may have not been required to perform research upon graduation, but this is no longer true. Today, every social work practitioner will be involved with some aspect of research. Current technological advancements, managed care policies, and financial constraints linked with political accountability are creating an environment that requires even the smallest grass-roots organizations to create and implement research techniques. Social services are increasingly expected to assess and summarize programs regularly in order to secure funding.

There has been an ongoing debate in social work literature about the best research paradigm for

our field (Fraser, 1991; Heineman, 1981). Some academics have tended to create a false dichotomy between research and practice. This author views research as simply the process of articulating how we see our world; it is the part of the curriculum that teaches students how to critically assess everything that they learn. The research courses should provide the most comprehensive conceptual framework possible for the material taught in the school's curriculum. Students should learn the traditional quantitative model foremost because it provides the best model that we have for acquiring unbiased knowledge. Concepts related to sampling, measurement, and the limitations/strengths of statistics are fundamental to students' ability to understand their roles in the field of social service.

During the early 1970's, many social workers did little or no research using the traditional deductive model. Of the few studies that did use the traditional research paradigm, none found statistical evidence of successful social work practice (Fischer, 1973). Indeed, we have become more scientifically advanced in the past twenty years. New tools for measurement and methods for application are still needed to advance our knowledge base, but innovative methods are being explored at this time (Gingerich, et. al., 1999; Kemp, 1999). As we become more sophisticated about research, we will create a more successful professional community.

A perfect research study does not exist; therefore professionals must examine research within its respective context. The fact that a research study is reliant upon the individual set of statistics used, and the all inferential statistics are strongly influenced by the sample size, is important to recognize. Many journals tend to publish research only if its findings have statistical significance based on the traditional scientific model, and significance is best found with large sample sizes that require large budgets. The social service community is forfeiting some of

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This article was commissioned for this issue by Editor Seymour J. Rosenthal.

our potential to learn empirical knowledge, through both positive and negative findings found by exploring various sample sizes and application models. When journals tend to publish the most "perfect" studies that they receive, they are simply acting as a vehicle for academics to get tenure and promotion. Some professionals suggest that the world of publication, like the world faced by service delivery practitioners, is filled with political biases (Howard & Jensen, 1999).

Community and policy level practice are fields where evaluation has been consistently valued, and most often utilized. Community development efforts, as well as the study of problems defined as structural, often begin with needs assessments. The evaluation of needs is the logical and responsible way to plan for policies and social service programs. A plan is often developed for both process and outcome evaluations at on-going, regular intervals. Process, or formative, evaluations examine the program's focus on its goals and objectives, and should be performed soon after a program commences and then regularly thereafter. The on-going implementation allows for making program adjustments as needed, and in a timely, cost-efficient manner. Outcome, or summative, evaluations are usually more expensive and complex, as they are designed to show how well a program has met its overall goals and objectives (Royse & Thyer, 1996). Members of The Council on Social Work Education, educators, and practitioners should increase their recognition that careful planning and evaluating should be used at every level in all fields of social work.

Social Work Practice and Continuing Education: Evaluation Skills for the Future

Social work practitioners hope that their knowledge, skills, and values ensure that clients receive the best possible interventions. Education at the BSW and MSW should only be the beginning of our learning research skills. Practitioners must continue to enhance their skills throughout their careers in order to feel assured that they are capable of providing the best services to clients.

Continuing education programs should play a major role in facilitating evaluative research. Programs could help practitioners appreciate the strengths and limitations of various research tools, methods, and models within the context of their professional practice. The programs could address the need for every practitioner to be able to understand and utilize the technological advances in our profession as well. With technology's rapid, continuous changes, the continuing education courses could help to teach and maintain skills with timeliness.

Programs to teach skills ranging from basic computer proficiency to specific research software should be made available. Data collection and analysis based on the differing agency and practitioner needs could be taught. Specific courses could include creative activities and exercises that encourage comfort and "start where the workers are." The programs could become instrumental in moving social work research to a new level of excellence. Academics, practitioners, and clients should create partnerships to address the needs of research, and continuing education could provide the necessary structure for implementation of their ideas. Continuing education professionals should provide the leadership for research development.

Conclusion

In an era when most post-industrialized nations seem to be shifting towards conservatism, social welfare programs in America are shrinking. Most Americans remain unmoved by the violence and drug abuse within the communities of the oppressed groups in our society, but the recent school shootings and heroin epidemic in the middle-class, white neighborhoods of this country are effecting the lives of people who were previously perceived as "safe." Today's problems, now seen as significant for their impact on all classes and races, provide a new urgency for solutions. Now is the time social workers can reach out to society, because it is reminiscent of the 1960's when societal problems touched all citizenry.

Social workers have a unique practice approach

best suited to address today's issues, because our field is alone in our dedication to working alongside clients with respect for their rights and abilities and with the goal of their empowerment. Our systems perspective (person-in-environment) ensures that we do not oversimplify the complex web of societal issues or each individual's multi-tiered enmeshment within it. We follow the issues from the client's personal relationships to political policies affecting their developmental experience. Social workers are needed more than ever before in our history, and program and practice evaluation research should be the language to speak to society's policy makers and influential leaders.

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