Practice-Informed Research: Contemporary Challenges and Ethical Decision-Making

Diana Rowan, Ph.D., MSW, LCSW
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
drowan@uncc.edu

Sonyia Richardson, MSW, LCSW
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
srichardson@uncc.edu

Dennis D. Long, Ph.D., MSW
Xavier University
longd3@xavier.edu

Abstract

The 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) call for social work students to be prepared to "engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice" (CSWE, 2015, p.8). This standard reinforces a position that ensures social workers are trained to utilize both practice and research proactively within their work. However, examples in social work literature of social workers using practice experiences to inform scientific inquiry are not plentiful, as practitioners are usually positioned as consumers rather than co-producers of research. An example is presented that illustrates dismissing without recognition what is not yet well-grounded in research literature but is verified in social work practice as an ethical consideration. Values-based questions such as the following are explored: Is it ethical for social scientists to discount practice-informed research in favor of research-informed practice? Do journal reviewers and editors dismiss contributions as not being a "good fit" or "adequately grounded in existing literature" if the topic falls outside of what is familiar or comfortable for them? Specific recommendations for social workers, researchers, and the social work publishing community are presented, such as ensuring journal reviewers and editorial boards have an understanding and appreciation for the importance of practice-informed research, and actively work to enlist the input of practitioners as reviewers and editorial board members.

Keywords: practice-informed research, competence, social work ethics, journals as gatekeepers, research-informed practice

Introduction

The relationship between practice and research within the social work profession has been perceived as almost dichotomous—that is, as two divisions that are classified separately. Practitioners rely upon researchers to identify best practices, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and programs, document human need, and advocate for change. Conversely, researchers depend upon practitioners to offer valuable insight concerning emerging issues, needs of population groups, and the efficacy of interventions. Historically, it has

been imperative that practitioners and researchers maintain a harmonious relationship in order to propel the field forward and find solutions to human problems. As the profession has progressed and expected competencies within the field have become standardized, it is expected that social workers function in a dual role, demonstrating competence with engaging in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.

Hence, in the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the Council on Social Work Education expects for social work students to be prepared and trained to operate in a dual function and "engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice" (CSWE, 2015, p.8). This standard ensures that social workers are trained to utilize practice and research proactively within their work. While social work students are being trained and encouraged to use research and practice in a dual function, EPAS has not allowed for the advent of some contemporary problems. Additionally, existing social work practitioners and researchers have not readily received preparation and training to serve in these dual functions. As a result, new graduates entering the field trained under the expectation of research-informed practice and practice-informed research, are entering a profession where the current practitioners and researchers have not yet clearly navigated how to engage seamlessly in these previously considered dichotomous practices.

Purpose

The purpose is to identify and highlight challenges and ethical considerations of incorporating practice-informed research into the work of existing social work practitioners and researchers. It will specify contemporary challenges with a particular focus on how to embrace social workers "in the trenches" as valued partners and producers in the research process. The social work literature is replete with examples of social work research conducted to inform practice. However, examples of social work practitioners using practice experiences to inform scientific inquiry

are less plentiful and evident as they are most frequently positioned as consumers rather than co-producers of research. Identifying these challenges and ethical considerations will assist in advancing social work practitioners to be seen as co-producers of research. Lastly, specific recommendations for practice-informed research for social work publishing companies, social work practitioners, and researchers are presented.

Review of Research Informed Practice

When social work practitioners are positioned as producers (Dudley, 2010) or co-producers of research, they contribute crucial insight and input in the research process, including practicalities associated with implementation, ethical considerations specific to the research topics and subjects, access to data, and sensitivity and competency with regard to issues of diversity. Viewing practitioners as co-producers of research supports the notion of social work being both a science and an art. The art of social work describes the less tangible and more intuitive aspects of practice where decisions, actions, and skills are based upon "cumulative experiences of helping professionals" and practice wisdom (Powers, Meenaghan, & Toomey, 1985, p. 12). Oftentimes, these are the individualized solutions crafted from years of experience and practice. As a result, the profession benefits significantly from the art of social work. Although the artistic context of the profession is part of its history, perhaps it is overlooked as social work leans even more to evidence-based practices. Evidence-based practice has its origin within scientific research, which can benefit from additional practitioner input regarding capturing, defining, and evaluating practice methods aligned with the art of social work.

The development of research for use in practice has matured considerably during recent decades and well beyond Meyer's (1976) characterization of social work research as being haphazard and with little demand. Austin (1999) chronicles and describes the advancement of social work research highlighting the development

of national support for research structures (e.g., the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research), national research awards (e.g., from the National Institute for Mental Health), research conferences (e.g., the Society for Social Work Research), and research structures in social work education programs (e.g., institutes and centers inside schools and colleges of social work).

While expansion of research resources has been critical for supporting researchers and the proliferation of knowledge, less evident is the development and progression of practice-informed research. During the growth and expansion of social work research came the creation of research team models where community and agency practitioners partnered with and informed social work researchers and doctoral students from universities and free-standing research institutes and centers (Austin, 1999). However, it can appear that these efforts may not have been sustained models and have not further developed throughout the years. It is also important to note that "controlling dissemination of information and access to data is a form of power: the more control an organization or group of organizations has, the more dominant it becomes in identifying what issues will be addressed by social research" (Meenaghan, Kilty, Long, & McNutt, 2013, p. 67). As a result, it benefits practitioners to align with organizations with power and control in order to have more influence and contributions towards research areas.

Social workers actively practicing in social service agencies face unique challenges for participating in research processes. By organizational mission, a social worker's agency is typically dedicated to a cause that does not have the production of research as a primary purpose or function. Practicing social workers are typically charged with utilizing limited resources to help clients and are employed in organizational settings characterized by "a lack of research addressing populations seen in practice" (McCracken & Marsh, 2008, p. 3030). Social workers also face large caseloads, budget cuts, the demand to perform multiple roles, and limited access to library data and information (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). When considering the pressures and constraints placed upon practicing social workers, the notion of dedicating precious time and energy to partner with and inform researchers about problems, population groups, and interventions is often impractical.

Practicing social workers should be important participants in promoting, formulating, conducting, interpreting, and utilizing research. MSW and BSW level practitioners often receive limited education and training concerning research methodology (Lietz & Zayas, 2010) and statistics, however, especially when compared to research-dedicated social and health scientists at the doctoral level. Not only do practitioners and researchers typically dwell in distinct and separate organizational contexts and cultures, social workers with direct practice experience are not always assimilated or reconciled to the methodological and statistical sophistication of their doctoral prepared and research-oriented counterparts. Whatever the reason(s), a disconnect and lack of regular and ongoing contact and communication between practitioners and researchers is an important consideration when examining the lack of research addressing cutting-edge populations and problems seen in practice, but not yet appearing in published research literature.

Ethical Considerations

As the social work profession increases its commitment towards practice-informed research, contemporary challenges and corresponding ethical considerations need to be addressed. The inclusion of practice-informed research in national standards and its impact on practitioners, researchers, and social service systems has received limited discussion. Social work educational programs implementing this EPAS standard must work to ensure that social work graduates are equipped to contribute meaningful work to this underdeveloped area and help to integrate practice-informed research.

Acceptance of Practice-Informed Research Contributions

The National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) addresses evaluation and research standards in section 5.02 suggesting that "social workers should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge" (5.02[b]). Social work practitioners and researchers are responsible for contributing to the knowledge base of the profession, thereby advancing the field. However, are social work practitioners adequately positioned to contribute to research teams and as scholarly contributors to social science literature, or must they be paired with a researcher for validation? Is their research contribution considered valuable to the field?

Beyond the functional challenges of linking practitioners and researchers, publication of practice-informed research can experience resistance with regard to publication in peer-reviewed journals. Examination of new ideas, concepts, and population groups revealed through the experience of practitioners, but lacking formal recognition and grounding in published literature, it can be subject to skepticism, scrutiny, and dismissal. Despite the opportunity for discovery, editors and reviewers who are predominately doctoral prepared and come from academic and research institutions may be reluctant to recommend publication of manuscripts depicting populations and concepts not well-grounded and documented in a substantive body of research. Publication can especially be an issue when examining very marginalized or small at-risk populations, as well as less visible or unpopular client groups.

Case Illustration

To illustrate challenges for publication of practice-based research, consider a case example where the partnership between community-based practitioners and researchers was crucial in expanding the social work knowledge base: social work practitioners working with a social service agency engaged in HIV-prevention work with a particularly marginalized segment of the community. These practitioners work with young Black gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM), as well as Black transgender women, who bear a disproportionate burden of new HIV infections (CDC, 2017a; 2017b) with young Black MSM accounting for more new infections than any other subgroup (CDC, 2016). The practitioners found it was difficult to engage clients in traditional HIV-prevention interventions and decided to "meet them where they are" by hosting a house/ball event with an HIV-prevention theme. The goal was to engage with the members of the house/ball community (Rowan, Long, & Johnson, 2013), in a manner that was culturally tailored, and to deliver HIV-prevention messages in terms that embraced and celebrated their rich cultural traditions.

This strategy was successful and provided HIV-prevention education to hundreds of attendees within the target population. The practitioners were interested in garnering research support for their work and enlisted the help of a local university researcher. The researcher was very interested in the innovative way the practitioners had designed an intervention that was culturally tailored to reach this group, which was both hard to engage and extremely high-risk. The researcher partnered with one of the practitioners to write an article about the house/ball culture. It was discovered that there were very few articles published on this specific subculture and they were limited to public-health-oriented literature. Until that date, social work literature had been silent on work with this group. Since the practitioner had no experience with writing for a journal, and the social work researcher had no experience with writing on a topic that was not yet appearing in the literature, they enlisted the support of a senior faculty member with success in academic publishing.

Interestingly, the process of enlisting the support of the senior social work faculty member required some education and convincing. Although keenly aware of the need to engage with marginalized groups experiencing vulnerabilities, this topic involved transgender issues, dressing in drag, and same-sex sexual behaviors within

the more mainstream African-American culture, which was unfamiliar and uncomfortable ground. Upon becoming informed and aware of the highly marginalized status of the group, however, the senior faculty member recognized the need to develop a literature and research base of knowledge about members of this population and how to reach them with health-promoting messages. To provide groundwork to facilitate research, Rowan, Long, and Johnson (2013) produced a scholarly article detailing the history of the subculture, the specific terminology that accompanies it, and a discussion of approaches to interventions for social workers. It was followed by an empirically grounded study with participants from the house/ball community (Rowan, DeSousa, Randall, White, & Holley, 2014).

Although this practice-informed research contributes significantly to practice, this particular type of practice-informed research creates potential challenges and conflicts when considering publication within peer reviewed journals. Consider the potential reservations and skepticism that might be held by journal editors and reviewers which may inadvertently be framed under areas such as relevance to the journal's audience, newness of the content, the fit with other articles being published in the journal, and lack of previous literature. While the content is informed and supported by the insight of practitioners, reviewers might question the validity and credibility of the information. Is it ethical for social scientists to discount practice-informed research in favor of research-informed practice? Do journal reviewers and editors dismiss contributions as not being a "good fit" or "adequately grounded in existing literature" if the topic falls outside of what is familiar or comfortable for them?

Competence of Practitioners for Research

The social work profession strongly advocates for practice within one's area of competence. The NASW Code of Ethics has competence as a core value (NASW, 2008), encouraging social workers to engage in work within their knowledge and expertise. When the

competence level is not sufficient for a particular subject area or populations, practitioners are encouraged to refer the case to someone with more expertise or knowledge. With the focus on practice-informed research, are current social work practitioners fully competent and prepared to contribute to social science research? If they have not received doctoral-level preparation and development, are they practicing within their area of competency?

Research suggests that social work students are often apprehensive and intimidated by the study of research methods (Morgenshtern, Freymond, Agyapong, & Greeson, 2011), and several approaches have been suggested to increase competency and comfort with research (Kranke, Brown, Atia, & Knotts, 2015; Bolin, Lee, GlenMaye, & Yoon, 2012). Engagement in practice-informed research would require for social work practitioners to have a clear understanding and assessment of their research-based competence level. Practitioners would need to know when and if it is necessary to seek a trained, experienced researcher to assist with carrying out their research agenda. It is important to consider the risks of engaging untrained practitioners in adding knowledge to the social sciences field if they do not have the level of competency and training necessary to ensure all research related risks are minimized.

Social work educational programs vary within their curricula, specializations, and research requirements. While some programs have a heavy clinical focus, other programs are more focused on research and evaluation. While CSWE-accredited programs all operate within the same educational standards, the implementation of those standards varies across programs. Thus, it is difficult to assess whether graduating social work students are prepared to engage in practice-informed research. As the standard of practice-informed research did not apply to graduates of social work educational programs prior to 2008, existing practitioners who have been in practice for a while may be even less trained, prepared, and competent to engage in this form of research.

Discussion

Practice-informed research is supported nationally by CSWE EPAS standards and is being implemented throughout accredited social work educational programs. Ethical challenges should be considered with the inclusion of this standard. The social work profession needs to be proactive in minimizing any ethical conflicts and identifying strategies to support practice-informed research.

Strengthening the training for competence in practice-informed research requires initial education of existing researchers and practitioners within the field. This was illustrated by the example provided of educating the senior faculty member about the importance of examining the needs of a population group well outside the mainstream in the literature. Fortunately, in this scenario, the faculty member was receptive. However, senior colleagues can use their power and position and influence to squelch research and publication initiatives involving new and less researched topics introduced and conducted in affiliation with a community agency. Conversely, practitioners need additional education by researchers about strategies for engaging in research and scholarship utilizing current practice experiences. This will aid in increasing overall competence of researchers and practitioners ensuring that professionals are practicing within their areas of knowledge and competence.

As social workers are to contribute to the knowledge base of the field, it is vital that journal reviewers and editorial boards have an understanding and appreciation for the importance of practice-informed research. Presently, journal reviewers can inadvertently favor manuscripts grounded in existing literature and of already known significance. Any such tendency is contrary to the mandate to produce "practice-informed research." If the practitioners are speaking and the journals are not willing to listen, discovery is limited and decisions can be made on the basis of values and subjective criteria, such as the perceived importance of a submission.

Additionally, editorial judgments and decisions made on the basis of population groups and topics not being "a good fit" with a journal can be biased and disadvantage lines of research (e.g., by not welcoming a substantive domain of research into mainstream journals). This occurs when a manuscript addresses the journal's aim and mission but is devalued or dismissed due to lying outside of social norms and comfort levels of reviewers and journal editors.

To normalize practice-informed research within the literature, the use of population-sensitive and savvy practitioners and researchers as manuscript reviewers is suggested. This will assist with valuing the positions of social workers serving in the trenches and familiar with marginalized population groups. It will also help to provide additional training and development for practitioners with research.

Recommendations for the Social Work Publishing Community

Practice-informed research has much to offer the social work publishing community, but strategies need to be implemented to assist with its implementation and acceptance. Practice-informed research must be considered as a valuable part of the "bench to bedside and back" feedback loop that is commonly used in other health-related fields. When submissions originating from practitioners arrive for review at journals, they should be recognized as such. Gatekeepers holding the keys to the professional journals must exercise some flexibility when considering practice-informed research submissions. Inflexibility may permanently frustrate clinicians and other practitioners who want to contribute what they know to the literature, in an attempt to share best practices, open dialogue, and further investigation through research. Journals should consider a separate venue for practitioners to communicate their experiences, such as "notes from the field" that do not require empirical support. The publishing community is encouraged to consider the development of a venue for translation of academic research findings into more practice-based language, such as for an online, searchable professional magazine.

Reviewers and editors must guard against

their own biases and values affecting decisions about publication. Practice-informed research may focus more on marginalized populations not discussed in mainstream literature. Editors must recognize that a reviewer who was possibly arbitrarily assigned to a manuscript may not have the depth of understanding of a population available to a practitioner or researcher devoting all of their time to interfacing with that population's issues. Thus, it's important to consider adding seasoned practitioners as reviewers of manuscripts that are more practice-informed.

Lastly, social work practitioners should find additional ways to contribute to practice-informed research that is outside of the publishing pipeline and not be limited by publishing demands and academic journals (Reamer, 1992). This will allow for more participation and dissemination of practice-based research.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Researchers

To spark interest and participation in practice-informed research, strategies must be developed by researchers to consistently seek input and involvement of practitioners in research, including new population groups for study. Researchers should welcome and value practitioner input to identify important issues, needs, and population groups to keep research on the cutting edge. This also includes advocating for the inclusion of practitioners on editorial boards and as reviewers.

Proposal, funding, and manuscript submission criteria should reward the active inclusion of practitioners in the research process. This ensures that practitioners are engaged during the development and research initiation phases. As a result of the inclusion of practitioners, researchers are also positioned to encourage practitioners to increase access and readership of professional publications.

At the university level, researchers could educate local practitioners about the importance of representation on editorial boards and encourage them to apply. Social work programs could also seek the involvement of social work field agency staff and supervisors in research projects.

Conclusion

It is necessary for social workers to continue fully to embrace a longstanding professional commitment to "promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge" (NASW, 2008, p. 13), to help people in need, and alleviate social problems. Although theory and conceptual frameworks serve as insightful and valuable components in research, social work practitioners are positioned in unparalleled ways to offer much needed information and context concerning contemporary population groups, problems, and issues for inquiry and collaborate in research. Partnerships between researcher and social work practitioners will require a deliberate and concerted effort. Meanwhile, in order for practice-informed research to be more fully valued and represented in the published literature, those in positions of power governing publication and the research enterprise will need to be challenged to acknowledge formally and to include practitioners as key members for translational research that completes the "bench to bedside and back" feedback loop used in other health-related fields.

References

Austin, D. M. (1999). A report on progress in the development of research resources in social work. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *9*(6), 673–707.

Bolin, B., Lee, K.H., GlenMaye, L., & Yoon, D.P. (2012). Impact of research orientation on attitudes toward research of social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 48*(2), 223–243.

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2016). Today's HIV epidemic [CDC fact sheet]. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/todaysepidemic-508.pdf

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2017a). HIV/AIDS: HIV among African American gay and bisexual men. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/msm/bmsm.html

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2017b). HIV/AIDS: HIV among transgender people. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/transgender/index.html

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Alexandria, VA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=81660

Dudley, J. R. (2010). *Research methods for social work: Being producers and consumers of Research.* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

Kranke, D., Brown, J. L., Atia, M., & Knotts, G. (2015). A pedagogical approach to engaging social work students in research. *Social Work Education, 34*(7), 895–901.

Lietz, C. A., & Zayas, L. E. (2010). Evaluating qualitative research for social work practitioners. *Advances in Social Work*, *11*(2), 188–202.

McCracken, S. G., & Marsh, J. C. (2008). Practitioner expertise in evidence-based practice decision making. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *18*(4), 301–310.

Meenaghan, T. M., Kilty, K. M., Long, D. D., & McNutt, J. G. (2013). *Policy, politics, and ethics: A critical approach*. Chicago. IL: Lyceum Books, Inc.

Meyer, C. H. (1976). *Social work practice: The changing landscape* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Morgenshtern, M., Freymond, N., Agyapong, S., & Greeson, C. (2011). Graduate social work students' attitudes toward research: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 31*(5), 552–568.

National Association of Social Workers. (2008). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Retrieved from https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp

Powers, G. T., Meenaghan, T. M., & Toomey, B. G. (1985). *Practice focused research: Integrating human service practice and research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Reamer, F. (1992). From the editor: "Publishing and perishing in social work education." *Journal of Social Work Education, 28*(2), 129-131. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.librarylink.uncc.edu/stable/23042902

Rowan, D., DeSousa, M., Randall, E. M., White, C. G., & Holley, L. (2014). "We're just targeted as the flock that has HIV": Health care experiences of members of the house/ball culture. *Journal of Social Work in Health Care, 53*(5), 460–477.

Rowan, D., Long, D. D., & Johnson, D. (2013). Identity and self-presentation in the house/ball community: A primer for social workers. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 25*(2), 178–196.