Useful Knowledge for Social Work Practice

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Social workers have a long-standing interest in the relation of knowledge and practice. Both the tasks of practice and the knowledge used to accomplish these tasks are defining characteristics of any profession. They are the basis by which professions differentiate themselves from one another and the means by which they legitimate their activities to the larger society and culture. Theorists and researchers of knowledge utilization have identified it as having both conceptual and instrumental aspects. To better understand knowledge utilization in the field of social work, a group of social work practitioners were asked to reflect on the utility of various types of formal information and knowledge and sources of that knowledge. Practitioner respondents expressed appreciation for theoretical knowledge, but gave highest utility ratings to knowledge that helps them solve problems they confront every day in practice, i.e., information about a social problem or information about the effectiveness of a particular social work intervention. Younger practitioners were more enthusiastic than older practitioners about the utility of formal knowledge.

1. Introduction

Knowledge utilization rests at the intersection of social work practice and research. It consists of a set of activities related to the awareness, consideration and use of knowledge to make practice decisions. With growing interest in empirically-based practice, social workers are giving greater attention to the types of knowledge and processes of dissemination that result in practice decisions that are influenced by social work theory and empirical research. The purpose of this analysis is to examine the types of knowledge that social workers consider they find useful.

What do we know about knowledge utilization in the social work profession? Going back to the Flexner Report of 1915, we see that a codified body of knowledge relevant to practice was considered a necessary characteristic of any profession. Both the work of a profession and the knowledge used to accomplish this work are defining characteristics of all professions. They are the basis by which professions differentiate themselves from one another and the means by which they legitimate their activities in the larger society and culture (Abbott 1988).

The knowledge base of social work is the accumulated theoretical work and empirical work that we use to benefit our clients. Research and knowledge development in our profession are a vast enterprise concerned with physical, mental and economic health; individual, family and community welfare; interests of diverse groups in society; thinking about problems, defining them and identifying effective means for ameliorating them. The modes of dissemination of this knowledge are equally diverse and include traditional textual outlets such as books and articles; relational outlets such as informal conversations with colleagues, formal consultations, continuing education workshops and seminars; and, increasingly, electronic

outlets such as Internet sites, electronic journals and conferences. As noted elsewhere, social work education is a powerful and significant dissemination enterprise that includes both textual and relational sources (Marsh 2002).

Theorists and researchers of knowledge utilization have identified it as having both conceptual and instrumental aspects (Caplan, Morrison & Stambaugh, 1975; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1979). In the first instance, research is used to influence thinking about a problem and, in the second, to solve a problem where knowledge is the means to the end of solving a problem. Theory may be the most likely source for conceptual utilization, while empirical research may be most relevant to solving a specific problem. In the end, both theoretical and empirical knowledge are used to advance the social work knowledge base (Marsh 2003).

The journal SOCIAL WORK, published by NASW Press and distributed as a benefit to 150,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers, is a foremost repository of social work knowledge. The mission of the journal, as it appears on the masthead, is to improve practice and extend knowledge in social work and social welfare. Given this mission, understanding knowledge utilization in social work in order to optimize the utility and relevance of the journal is a priority. As a strategy to better understand knowledge utilization in this field, the editor, in the July 2003 issue, invited all readers to respond to a brief consumer survey printed in the issue asking for their reports of useful and relevant social work knowledge. This analysis provides detailed findings from the survey that were briefly summarized in an editorial in the October 2004 issue of SOCIAL WORK.

2. Methods Used

Survey Sample

Data for the present study were obtained from the Knowledge Utilization Survey in the aforementioned July 2003 issue of SOCIAL WORK. Of the 150,000 journal readership, 407 (99 males, 292 females, 16 unspecified) completed and returned the survey. Most of the respondents held an MSW (70%), and the remaining reported as a PhD/DSW (10%), MSW student (9%), doctoral student (5%), or BSW student (3%). The majority identified their primary field of practice in the mental health (34%) or child welfare (14%) settings, and the rest indicated that the respondents were in the fields of health (11%), aging (8%), substance abuse (7%), school social work (7%), criminal justice (3%) and occupational social work/EAP (2%). More than half of the respondents were over 40 years old (67%). The respondents reported that their primary practice roles were practitioners (69%), administrators (9%), educators (9%) and researchers (3%). The majority were white/Caucasian, not Hispanic/Latino in origin (85%), and the remaining ethnicities included African American (6%), Chicano/Mexican American (2%), Puerto Rican (1%) and Asian American (1%). A great percentage of the respondents indicated that they were heterosexual (83%), and the rest answered they were lesbian (6%), gay male (3%) or bisexual (2%).

Although the survey was distributed to a nationwide audience, the results reflect a biased sample due to a low response rate. There may be several reasons for the discrepancy between the readership and respondents. One possibility, for example, may be that respondents were asked to return their surveys to the national NASW office within a relatively short time frame (approximately two months after distribution). Timing of the survey's distribution may have also been a factor in the response rate. In particular, since the survey was published in July, it is possible that some portion of the readership lacked access to SOCIAL WORK due to time away from the office and/or home.

Furthermore, since respondents were asked to mail their completed surveys, this required some effort on a respondent's part. The data may be indicative of a disproportionate number of highly motivated individuals whose comments are more likely to reflect an extremely positive or negative viewpoint. Nevertheless, the study is meaningful for the opinions obtained from this group for defining useful articles and useful information sources.

Survey Protocol

The survey focused on three main questions pertaining to consumer knowledge utilization.

The first set of questions was designed to elicit information on what kind of articles the readers of SOCIAL WORK defined as relevant and useful. Respondents were also asked to name a specific article (author, approximate title, year) from the journal that had been useful or influential to their practice. These questions were left open-ended and were created to elicit a wide range of consumer feedback in the form of brief comments and short narratives.

The second set of questions focused on the types of practice-relevant content that respondents perceived to be useful. These questions were presented in the survey in a randomized order. The readers were asked to use a 6-point scale to rate the usefulness of different types of content for social work practice. The 6-point scale ranged from 1, where 1 = "provides information that is not useful for social work practice", to 6, with 6 = "provides information that is useful for social work practice".

The third set of questions was concerned with understanding which sources of information readers find most useful for social work practice. These questions were also presented in random order and used the same 6-point scale to rate the relative usefulness of various information (discussion of cases with other social workers) and formal methods (empirical research articles or books, theoretical articles or books, how-to articles or books, workshops, etc.) for obtaining knowledge.

Procedure

Respondents were asked to answer 12 questions which were modeled after a previous study on psychotherapy research for professional psychologists conducted in 1986. Two master's-level students at the University of Chicago assisted in the organization, entry and data analysis of the responses. For the two qualitative questions, two separate tables were created, and the survey respondents' answers were recorded exactly as written into each of the tables. The results were then sorted and reviewed for keywords in dictating patterns of responses and repetitions in answers. For the quantitative questions, each response was coded and entered into a database created in SPSS. To reduce the margin of error during the data entry process, responses were coded according to specific rules. First, regarding the question of level of social work education, if a respondent marked more than one answer, the highest level of education was included in the data. Second, regarding the question of primary and secondary fields of practice, a greater weight (200%) was placed on the responses to the question of primary field of practice.

3. Results

Usefulness of SOCIAL WORK Articles with Different Types of Content

Respondents ranked the following types of practice-relevant content from most to least useful: (1) information and evidence about a social problem or clinical diagnosis; (2) information and

evidence about the effectiveness of social work practice; (3) information and evidence about a population group; (4) information and evidence about social work ethics; (5) information about the social work profession; (6) information and evidence I can use for advocacy; (7) information about theoretical perspectives; (8) information and evidence I can use in teaching; (9) information and evidence about research methodology; and (10) information about epistemological issues in social work research.

Table 1 summarizes respondents' ratings of the types of content they find most useful. Although some readers rated some types of knowledge on the "useless" end, of the continuum, on average respondents viewed the information categories as useful[1]. The three most useful categories of information were about: (1) the character of particular social problems, (2) the effectiveness of practice strategies and (3) particular population groups. Articles providing information about social work ethics ranked a close fourth. Articles about the social work profession itself were considered useful. Articles that readers of SOCIAL WORK reported as *least* useful were those giving information about research methodology and epistemology.

These responses are consistent with beliefs expressed in respondents' narrative comments in which they requested the following types of SOCIAL WORK articles:

- "Domestic violence, current or revised child welfare laws, and gender-specific issues."

- "Social work articles dealing with "high risk" (urban youth, families, the elderly and adequate healthcare for the indigent). How to combat continuous racism, sexism and preferential treatment".

- "Evidence-based treatments; research around mental health topics; managed care topics".

- "Boundary issues, values and ethics, elder abuse managed care; and the articles on children in this issue (V. 48, N. 3) are very helpful for licensure study" Reamer (2003). "Boundary issues in social work".

- "Articles that pertain to the fields of policy and policy change, articles that highlight effective programs and interventions, articles on adoption and foster care, any articles that address diversity and ethical issues".

- "Articles that emphasize community organization, administration, evaluation, social issues – rather than clinical practice. Also articles dealing with theoretical and conceptual underpinnings. But one never knows when an article in other categories might evoke interest".

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[1] In Table 1, 1 = "provide information that is not useful for social work practice"; 6 = "provides information that is useful in social work practice".

	Mean	SD
Information and evidence about a social problem or clinical diagnosis	4.71	1.33
Information and evidence about the effectiveness of social work practice	4.48	1.56
Information and evidence about a population group	4.29	1.41
Information and evidence about social work ethics	4.25	1.52
Information about the social work profession	4.06	1.53
Information and evidence I can use for advocacy	3.99	1.54
Information about theoretical perspectives	3.91	1.51
Information and evidence I can use in teaching	3.60	1.73
Information and evidence about research methodology	3.00	1.582
Information about epistemological issues in social work	2.94	1.63

Figure 1: Usefulness of Articles with Different Types of Content

Usefulness of Information Sources

Social workers are bombarded from a variety of sources with knowledge and information relevant to practice. When readers of SOCIAL WORK were asked about the sources of knowledge they preferred, their answers provided valuable perspectives. As shown in Table 2, readers preferred sources of information that are relational versus textual. Their most preferred sources of information were: (1) discussion of cases with other social workers and (2) workshops on social work practice. Respondents' preferences for information and knowledge derived from direct interpersonal interaction with other practitioners is consistent with research on knowledge utilization in other professions (Cohen, Sargent and Sechrest 1985). The third most useful source of information rated by respondents was "articles and books by social work practitioners". "Articles and books by social work researchers/scholars" and "articles and books by experts outside social work" were also rated as useful, but not as

useful as those by "practitioners". Taken together, these findings indicate that contributions from practitioners are considered to be most useful by readers of SOCIAL WORK.

Total	Mean	SD
Discussions of cases with other social workers	5.07	1.08
Workshops on social work practice	5.05	1.08
Articles and books by a social work practitioner	4.85	1.04
How-to articles or books on social work practice	4.76	1.17
Articles and books by social work researchers/scholars*	4.38	1.29
Empirical research articles or books on social work practice	4.34	1.40
Theoretical articles or books on social work practice	4.21	1.33
Articles and books by an expert outside social work	4.07	1.31

Figure 2: Usefulness of Information Sources

The findings summarized in Table 2 also indicate that, although readers value both instrumental and conceptual knowledge, they give a slight preference to "how to" articles and books and "empirical research" over "theoretical articles and books". Thus, while all sources of knowledge were rated as useful by these readers, they gave their highest ratings to knowledge and information deriving most directly from practice, i.e., contributions from practitioners relevant to solving practice problems. As members of a practice profession, respondents were most directly focused on identifying "what works", on the ideas and interventions likely to be of greatest benefit to clients.

Numerous responses from the open-ended question reinforced the perspective that practitioners seek to learn very directly from practice. In the words of respondents, they prefer:

- "Articles that are useful in clinical practice. One can combine intervention research with more theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Most articles in this journal are not

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* Indicates that the means of the two groups (younger and older respondents) are significantly different.

at all pertinent to social work practice knowledge. Most articles in this journal are not at all pertinent to social work practice for the average clinician. If you look at psychology, psychiatry, and nursing journals they often are theoretical but useful".

- "Articles that combine a particular philosophy/ethic with experience through real practice".

Demographic Characteristics and Views of Useful Knowledge

To assess whether there were differences in views of useful knowledge based on demographic characteristics, we evaluated differences in responses to the structured questions based on age, race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. The only significant differences were that readers of SOCIAL WORK under the age of 40 were more enthusiastic about and gave higher utility ratings to all forms and sources of knowledge than did those readers over 40. These age differences are displayed in Tables 3 and 4. Findings displayed in Table 3 indicate that younger social workers are significantly ($P < .05$) more enthusiastic than other social workers about the following types of content: (1) information and evidence about the effectiveness of social work practice, (2) information and evidence about a population group, (3) information and evidence about social work ethics and (4) information about theoretical perspective.

Findings in Table 4 show that there are age differences in the ways that readers rank various information sources. Younger respondents give more credence to contributions by social work researchers and scholars than older respondents. The least useful source of knowledge for younger respondents was "Articles and books by experts outside social work," while the least useful sources of knowledge for older respondents was "Articles and books by social work researchers and scholars".

Table 4 also shows an overall difference in level of enthusiasm for all sources of knowledge. There was an average difference of approximately .46 in the mean of each item for the younger respondents and those who were over 40. Only half of the information sources listed in Table 4, however, were identified as significantly different ($p<.05$) between the two groups. Those identified to be significantly different included: how-to articles or books on social work practice, workshops on social work practice, articles and books by a social work practitioner and articles and books by social work researchers and scholars. The most striking difference was the higher ratings given to social work researchers and scholars by the younger group.

<40 years	Mean	SD	>40 years	Mean	SD
Information and evidence about a social problem or clinical diagnosis	4.87	1.15	Information and evidence about a social problem or clinical diagnosis	4.67	1.35
Information and evidence about the effectiveness of social work practice	4.83	1.22	**Information and evidence about the effectiveness of social work practice**	4.30	1.66
Information and evidence about a population group	4.66	1.07	**Information and evidence about social work ethics**	4.24	1.56
Information about the social work profession	4.59	1.27	Information and evidence about a population group	4.12	1.50
Information and evidence about social work ethics	4.33	1.39	**Information about the social work profession**	3.83	1.54
Information and evidence I can use for advocacy	4.30	1.47	Information and evidence I can use for advocacy	3.77	1.51
Information about theoretical perspectives	4.27	1.25	**Information about theoretical perspectives**	3.58	1.53
Information and evidence I can use in teaching	3.87	1.61	Information and evidence I can use in teaching	3.45	1.76
Information and evidence about research methodology	3.60	1.50	Information and evidence about research methodology	2.79	1.57
Information about epistemological issues in social work research	3.57	1.58	Information about epistemological issues in social work research	2.63	1.50

Bold type represents t – test significant at p <.05.

Figure 3: Usefulness of Articles with Different Types of Content by Age

<40 years	Mean	SD	>40 years	Mean	SD
Discussions of cases with other social workers	5.07	1.08	Discussions of cases with other social workers	4.97	1.34
Workshops on social work practice	5.05	1.08	**Workshops on social work practice***	4.57	1.32
Articles and books by a social work practitioner	4.85	1.04	**Articles and books by a social work practitioner**	4.48	1.39
How-to articles or books on social work practice	4.76	1.17	**How-to articles or books on social work practice**	4.46	1.51
Articles and books by social work researchers/scholars	4.38	1.29	Articles and books by an expert outside social work	3.97	1.33
Empirical research articles or books on social work practice	4.34	1.40	Empirical research articles or books on social work practice	3.68	1.51
Theoretical articles or books on social work practice	4.21	1.33	Theoretical articles or books on social work practice	3.51	1.44
Articles and books by an expert outside social work	4.07	1.31	**Articles and books by social work researchers/scholars**	3.43	1.55

Bold type represents a t – statistic significant at p <.05.

Figure 4: Usefulness of Information Sources Sorted by Age

Readers' Descriptions of Useful Articles

Respondents' qualitative descriptions of useful knowledge fall into five broad categories consisting of: mental health (12%); child issues, including child welfare (9%); geriatric/aging (8%); ethics, values and boundary issues (11%); and school social work (4%). A few responses that did not fit into one of the above categories often reflected a general criticism of the journal.

When asked to cite a specific SOCIAL WORK article that has been useful or influential in a respondent's practice, respondents cited a number of different articles. However, we found 19 articles that were mentioned more than one time. In addition, there were five articles that were cited more than five times. Titles of articles considered especially useful were:

- A Model for Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- Advocating in Schools for Children with Disabilities

- Clients' Views of Successful Helping Relationships

- Excavating Our Frame of Mind: The Key to Dialogue and Collaboration

- Does Social Work Oppress Evangelical Christians?

It should be noted that several of the above articles were in the July 2003 issue of SOCIAL WORK. This suggests that a convenience factor strongly influenced many respondents' answers. Clearly, some respondents answered the question by examining the issue of the journal where the survey appeared to identify specific articles they considered useful. It should also be noted that several people (16), indicated that they found no articles in SOCIAL WORK to be useful or relevant.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this reader survey from a widely disseminated social work journal provide helpful information about what knowledge social workers find useful. The overall result is that social workers rate all types and sources of knowledge as useful. At the same time, their ratings of different types and sources of knowledge point to factors that influence their preferences.

Readers of SOCIAL WORK are interested in gaining knowledge that helps them understand social problems, critical populations and services that are effective. They also are interested in information about the profession itself and about professional ethics. At the same time, readers of this generalist journal are least interested in articles about research methodology and epistemology. Given that the majority (77%) of respondents describe their primary professional role as practitioner (compared to 10% educator, 3% researcher and 10% administrator), it follows these readers should give priority to types and sources of knowledge that are directly relevant to improving practice. The focus of these readers on practice-relevant knowledge points to the challenge faced by a generalist professional journal like SOCIAL WORK. David Austin identified this challenge when he wrote, "This is also a persistent issue as to whether general professional journals in social work … are intended to serve primarily as publication outlets for the diverse interests of academic faculty, rather than consistent sources of tested information for the practitioner community (Austin 1998, 31). Austin's caution is consistent with the results of this readers survey, indicating readers of this general professional journal expect, hope and prefer tested information relevant to practice. Readers of a specialty journal, for example, a journal focusing on social work research, might well give higher ratings to articles dealing with research methodology and epistemology because they consider this to be the specialty content that belongs in a specialty journal.

Although all sources of knowledge are considered useful, respondents express a clear preference for knowledge that comes as directly as possible from practice and practitioners. They prefer face-to-face information exchange and give high ratings to articles and books produced by social work practitioners. These findings provide clear support for efforts to encourage social work practitioners to participate more directly in the knowledge dissemination enterprise. Practitioner-generated knowledge clearly has the most credibility and relevance to recent trends in professional education that encourage social workers to engage in knowledge development and dissemination (EPAS 2000). The findings support all models of practice, such as the researcher-practitioner model that encourages practitioners to develop and disseminate knowledge based on their practice experience. Further, results from the survey indicate that these social work readers value theory and conceptual work, but their primary interest in terms of their professional journal is instrumental knowledge that helps them address everyday practice problems.

Survey findings also point to the differential influence of youth and enthusiasm versus age and experience. Younger readers of SOCIAL WORK are more enthusiastic about and give higher utility ratings to all forms and sources of knowledge that do older readers. Younger readers are more likely to prefer contributions by social work researchers and scholars than are older readers. Overall, newer members of the profession report an eagerness to learn that might be expected from those who are less able to rely on experience.

The results of this reader survey are both consistent and inconsistent with the knowledge utilization literature. Based on the knowledge utilization literature, we would expect social workers to find most utility in knowledge derived directly from interaction with a trusted colleague, from relational knowledge. And, while we would expect practitioners to be concerned with practice-relevant knowledge, we also would expect them to cite the value of conceptual knowledge, knowledge that helps them think about practice problems in new ways. The results of this survey were somewhat inconclusive on this point, for while respondents gave higher ratings to instrumental forms of knowledge, several of the specific articles they cited as useful were quite conceptual in character.

In sum, we learn from this survey that readers are interested in knowledge that advances social work practice and that comes out of practice. While these social workers appreciate "good theory" and point to specific theoretical articles as useful, they give higher utility ratings to knowledge that helps them solve problems they confront every day in practice. These perspectives are expressed most enthusiastically by younger members of the profession who clearly rely on their professional journal to provide knowledge they need to practice. Because the health of the social work profession depends quite directly on the availability of useful knowledge, understanding its character and participating in its development and dissemination become an important responsibility for every professional.

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