
Will History Repeat Itself? An Overview of the Development of Knowledge for the Professional Social Worker

*Margaret H. Lloyd
The University of Kansas School of Social Welfare*

Abstract

The Industrial Revolution transformed the social, economic, political and intellectual landscape of the United States. This transformation also manifested in a philosophical shift within social work practice, eventually leading to the field seeking professional status. In addition to briefly elaborating on this shift, this paper will discuss how the process of, and commitment to, professionalizing social work has affected the pursuit of knowledge over time, and has resulted, for better or for worse, in a professional emphasis on building practice knowledge through scientific research. As described in more detail herein, there have been mixed reactions and conflicting implications to social work's commitment to positivist and neo-positivist methods as a means of garnering relevant knowledge. The conclusion of this analysis will address how these themes in social work's history influence current practice, and will provide concrete suggestions toward a new direction for the profession.

A Brief History of the Professionalization of Social Work

Early social work

Prior to the advent of the professional social worker in the United States, volunteer-based charity organizations and settlement houses attempted to address the urban social problems caused by the Industrial Revolution. Although this charity work was initially motivated by a spirit of Christian brotherhood, the zeitgeist at the turn of the 20th century called for scientific, rather than exclusively religious, explanations of cause and effect. This ideology affected the pursuit of knowledge for unpaid social workers. The new idea that poverty could be caused by discord between individuals and their environment, rather than a moral failing, suggested that pragmatic action could be taken to alleviate suffering (see Addams, 1910; Richmond, 1917; Franklin, 1986). Knowledge employed by these volunteers was acquired through an apprenticeship model and advanced through practical experience. Using practice-based knowledge grounded in a rational, and therefore scientific, approach put the field in a position to focus on the “development of a discipline that could be widely practiced and communicated by education” (Johnson, 1947, p. 300). Formalizing social work education would be the first major step toward professionalizing the field.

The laboring oar in establishing social work education was taken up by social caseworkers who focused their intervention on individuals, rather than settlement workers, who emphasized changing social conditions. Mary Richmond, then director of the Baltimore Charity Organization Society, and Edward Divine, executive director of the New York Charity Organization Society, advocated for social work education and the first course was offered in New York in 1889 (Austin, 1983; Richmond, 1917). Because social work education was established by caseworkers, the focus on knowledge and methods relevant to casework grew as the field continued to professionalize. The formal education model of transmitting social work knowledge did not eclipse the value of practicing in the community, however. Mary Richmond described that “case work cannot be mastered from books or from class room instruction alone,

although both have their place in its mastery” (Richmond, 1917, p.32). Attaining social work knowledge, then, implied a synthesis of education and practical experience.

The Flexner factor

Schools of philanthropy proliferated and the number of career caseworkers grew. As a means of furthering the professionalization of social work, the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections convened to discuss education for social work. Abraham Flexner, who authored a transformative report on medical education five years earlier, was invited to address whether he believed social work to be a profession (Austin, 1983; Flexner, 2001). His answer was no, social work was not a profession. Flexner’s analysis was largely due to his perception that the field lacked a scientific knowledge base (Flexner, 2001). Although the casework approach was scientific in that workers sought rational explanations for social problems based on information obtained through the five senses, Flexner pointed out that social work did not employ its own scientific knowledge to solve the problems it identified. Rather, Flexner argued, social workers acted as mediators between individuals and actual professions (Flexner, 2001). While it is unclear based on social work literature the extent to which Flexner’s speech shook the confidence of practitioners on the front lines, it certainly spurred a century of academics and authors to actively pursue scientific social work knowledge, to once and for all prove social work’s professional status.

Possibly in response to Flexner’s critique, by the First World War social work had largely abandoned its community reform focus, instead pursuing full-throttle the advancement of knowledge regarding “family dynamics and individual personality development” (Axinn & Levin, 1975, pp. 152-153). Mary Richmond authored her seminal work, *Social Diagnosis*, in 1917. The goal of the book was to provide a basic foundation for social work knowledge through casework. Richmond saw that casework and social reform were both important to improving the lives of social work clients, however, she recognized that methodological techniques for casework would thrust social work toward professional status (Richmond, 1917).

Social Work as Casework

The primacy of casework within the burgeoning profession was unequivocally agreed upon by the social work community at the Milford Conference between 1925-1929. The Milford Conference included twenty-five of the nation’s leading social workers who convened annually during its four years to discuss aspects to the ongoing development of the profession (Lee & American Association of Social Workers, 1929). The Milford Conference report discussed that social work was on the precipice of fully professionalizing and that in order to achieve professional status the field should focus on general practice, education and, for the first time, research. The Conference report urged social caseworkers to undertake research themselves. Importantly, the Milford Conference participants suggested that social work research should be purposeful. “The research of the social case worker should go beyond the discussing of data and principles necessary for the discharge of his own immediate function. It should aim to throw light upon deep-seated factors in social life which lead to difficulties of adjustment between the individual and his social environment” (Lee & AASW, 1929, p. 42). By explicitly calling for social work research, the field furthered its aim at professionalization. However, the problem of undertaking this research—who, what, when, where, why, and how—only seemed to further complicate social work knowledge and its ability to obtain, per the auspices of Flexner, true professional status.

The Professional Social Work Researcher

Arguably, one of the most significant outcomes of the profession's research agenda following the Milford Conference was the beginning of a shift in social work authority from the practitioner to the academic. This had enduring implications for the way knowledge was developed and disseminated. The shift was instigated by a number of professional activities including the creation of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in 1946. In order to actualize the field's focus on research, the CSWE commissioned a series of reports to evaluate social work education, starting with the Hollis-Taylor report in 1951 that criticized social work's knowledge base as unsystematic (Dunlap, 1993; E. V. Hollis, 1951). A second report by Mencher in 1959 called for a specialization in social work research, similar to specializations in casework or group work (Dunlap, 1993). By training researchers in schools, the field could further build its academic cohort and, hopefully, its professional status.

These newly trained researchers went to work to prove, using positivist methods, that social work interventions were useful. However, Joel Fischer's (1973) metaanalysis of experimental studies on social casework suggested that in half of the studies "clients receiving services in the experimental group were shown either to deteriorate... or to demonstrate improved functioning at a lesser rate than control subjects" (pp. 15-16). The professional reaction to this research was not to remain loyal to practice knowledge by questioning the applicability of methodology or measurement, but rather led to widespread critique of the effectiveness of social work interventions. These results were indicative of a repetitious effect caused by professionalizing: in order to garner professional respect, social work needed to scientifically research its practice, but the results of these studies were grim; so, motivated by the perceived need for supportive studies to grant social work true professional status, thinking about practice shifted toward obtaining better scientific results. This finalized the transfer of the responsibility of developing professional social work knowledge from the front line workers to the academics, and prompted a period of self-consciousness in the field that persists to the present.

This insecurity regarding the capabilities of social work practitioners, and subsequent power transfer, was apparent in William Gordon's (1965) article, "Towards a Social Work Frame of Reference", which was written in follow-up to the *Working Definition of Social Work Practice* formulated by Harriet Bartlett and the recently formed National Association of Social Workers. The discussion by this time had shifted from "Is social work a profession?" to "What is social work *doing* as a profession?", the pejorative subtext of the latter suggesting the field was hanging onto its professional status by a thread. Gordon proposed that the crux of social work, and its only hope for professional survival, had to do with its knowledge and values, not its practice methods or techniques. He pointed out that developing this prescribed body of scientific knowledge would require "a focusing and concentration of effort on a more restricted range of phenomena than [social work was] used to dealing with and a concentration on a relatively fewer number of main ideas or themes" (Gordon, 1965). Since social work had originated from a bog of social problems, and was historically committed to helping the vulnerable, oppressed and disenfranchised—a complicated population—Gordon's suggestion pointed to a sentiment within the field that would cause further fractioning between practice and research, and between researchers: will our knowledge-base be enhanced by developing simpler interventions that can be easily researched?

How to do social work science: The epistemology debate

A rash of criticism to the reductionist movement in social work academe arose during the following decades. Florence Hollis (1968), writing about social work education, urged educators to maintain some skepticism about research, highlighting the fact that social work research was still in its infancy and relied heavily on methods from psychology and sociology which often fit poorly with social work practice. She also pointed out that “not all findings in social work are reported in writing.... this phenomenon of the oral tradition leads to serious gaps in our knowledge of the history of casework practice and theory” (F. Hollis, 1968, p.188). This called for awareness in educators and social work scholars of the limitations of positivism, as well as the existence of subjugated or otherwise unavailable knowledge.

Roberta Wells Imre (1984) also fought back against professional allegiance to logical positivism. She argued that “the separation of knowledge and value is an epistemological issue that reflects some serious current problems in the profession” (Imre, 1984, p. 41). Importantly, Imre also acted as whistleblower on her academic colleagues who had seemingly become so obsessed with acquiring scientific knowledge that values, social work’s bread and butter, were being ignored. Her point was not that the scientific method should be categorically discarded, but that it was only one of many ways of acquiring knowledge.

Most recently, two key pieces highlight the ongoing epistemological discussion originating in social work’s drive to professionalize. Cnaan and Dichter (2008) point out the complicated nature of social work in that it is a type of work and a discipline, as well as an art and a science. The authors make this point to argue that “overquantifying social work” both deteriorates our profession and overlooks the “art of practice” (Cnaan & Dichter, 2008). However, despite this acknowledgment, the authors suggest that in order to maintain professional status, social work must focus on slowly acquiring social work knowledge through neo-positivist research. The authors advocate for continued use of “evidence-based practice” using Gibbs and Gambril’s five stages of knowledge use (see Cnaan & Dichter, 2008).

On the other end of the epistemological continuum, Longhofer and Floersch (2012) convincingly argue that social work research should employ critical realism, a philosophy of science that “allows us to rethink positivist and conventionalist assumptions about the fact/value relation” (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012, p. 499). The approach offers an alternative to positivist research questions, measurement tools, causal determination, etc. Using this progressive research paradigm, the authors suggest, would allow social work to close the “theory-to-practice gaps” still present in the field. However, the authors recognize that employing this philosophy of science would be subversive and may require researchers to “relinquish the benefits of academic/disciplinary inclusion, upward or lateral mobility” (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012, p. 513). Reviewing these recent articles, it is clear that due to social work’s focus on professionalizing, social work research still maintains an air of intellectual superiority to practice wisdom, and that the field lacks consensus regarding a suitable research paradigm.

In summary, social work’s impulse to professionalize has mainstreamed the nature of knowledge throughout the history of the field: first, by establishing schools that taught casework methods for working with individuals and families; second, by unifying behind generic practice and calling for social work research; third, by shifting the responsibility for knowledge development from practitioners to scholars and researchers; and finally, at present, by concurrently employing and criticizing traditional research methods. What this boils down to is

the field's ongoing search for approval from external mechanisms (i.e. Flexner, the scientific community, and funding sources), which seems to be achieved, at least partially, by meeting the status quo rather than advocating for change. The premise of the ongoing epistemological debate in social work begs the question as to how social work research can actually contribute to practice. Despite the critiques highlighted above, positivist and neo-positivist research methodology has maintained a premiere position, and researchers continue fighting for research-based practice in order to enhance the field's credibility. Repeating history like this keeps us going in circles and valuable information is lost in the process.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Our field is in a position to break free from, and transcend, the cycle of divisiveness within the field. The theme of professionalization pushing social work towards scientification highlights the limited capacity of research to enhance practice. The original purpose of research in the field was to ensure that practice was actually helping the people we were trying to help. This is an honorable goal. However, by all but dismissing traditional casework as ineffective, as was done by many authors (e.g., Fischer, 1981; Gambriel, 1999; Reid, 1977), and returning to research to find answers for practice, the field has arguably fallen further from its professional goals as well as its values. Neo-positivist research, while conceding that no research is value-free, can still limit the expression of social work values by utilizing outcome measurements that do not reflect the experience of the oppressed and vulnerable—the folks we are trying to help.

On the other hand, participating in research can help our client population in certain ways: by bringing in funding for practice-based projects, and offering a platform for our voice. If social work were to abandon the components to our field that meet external standards of professionalism, including research, we may lose the chance to help our clients altogether. Therefore, it seems, reconciling these competing elements, and capturing as much knowledge as possible, is best accomplished by embracing a pluralist research paradigm to examine practice-based phenomena from multiple angles, using multiple, competing, methodologies (i.e., utilizing neo-positivist, heuristic and critical realist paradigms, etc.), all grounded in our values.

Implications for Education, Research and Practice

Imbuing our values at all levels of social work has implications for how the field operates. Specifically, an environment of mutual respect, exemplifying the importance of human relationships, must be fostered in classrooms. This is not to say that professors of social work do not have valuable knowledge to transmit to students; but it is imperative that social work professors impart such knowledge in a way that empowers students to love learning, and that will encourage them to maintain an interest in continuing education after school. The push to communicate research findings in a user-friendly way must continue so that all social workers can participate in discourse regarding research findings. This also asks that social work researchers question findings which suggest a wholesale failure on the part of practitioners. Research questions, measurement instruments, statistical tools and researchers themselves are fallible. Social work researchers must strive to find harmony between research findings and practice wisdom; to live the values of our field.

Social work practitioners can learn from the experience of their foremothers by participating in, and expanding upon, the research-to-practice and practice-to-research communication pathways. Implications for practice also include a commitment to maintaining mutual respect for social workers involved in education and research. On the ground this would

manifest in practitioners reaching out to researchers with questions that arise in practice, and staying connected to research findings to incorporate into practice. Practitioners and researchers should not be pitted against one another, each attempting to enforce their preferred epistemology on the other. Rather, they should be working in tandem to build many types of knowledge, such as quantifiable, values-based or intuitive, that aid our clients. Supporting the field in all of its demonstrations from within encourages problem-solving by all.

Conclusion

Grounding this profession in its stated values necessarily involves social workers practicing the social work principles with their all of their colleagues, whether they be researchers, practitioners or educators. Fostering professional unity and mutual respect, whereby power differentials between social workers are diminished, will mitigate ongoing division in our attempts to build knowledge. Our profession's development, as described in this paper, suggests that the urge to choose a single mechanism for harvesting and generating knowledge is misguided. Privileging one source of knowledge is also antithetical to our values. Counter-intuitively it is by embracing pluralism, the manifestation of professional self-determination, that is required for the field to unite and avoid repeating history.

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Margaret Lloyd is a paralegal, graduate research assistant and second-year doctoral student at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare. Margaret's research and scholarship interests include the nexus of substance abuse, child well-being, with a specific focus on restorative justice and therapeutic jurisprudence. Along with experience in the legal sector, she has worked in a therapeutic setting with youth affected by familial substance issues, as well as adolescents and adults in recovery. Margaret earned her BA in Psychology from the University of Arizona in 2008, and her MS in Psychology from Avila University in 2011.