Reflections on the Scientist-Practitioner Model in Social Work Doctoral Education

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Abstract

The scientist-practitioner model (S-P) is one of the primary frameworks social work has utilized in an effort to infuse research into practice and practice into research. With a firm practitioner orientation already embedded into bachelor and master of social work programs, concerted efforts have been made to infuse the scientist aspect of the model into these programs. Conversely, at the doctoral level the primary focus shifts to developing researchers and so while the scientist orientation is firmly rooted in PhD curriculums the practitioner aspect of the model is less evident. However, parallel efforts to infuse doctoral programs with a stronger practitioner orientation are lacking. Through a reflection on my experiences as a first year doctoral student as they relate to the S-P model, considerations for social work doctoral education are discussed. My experiences reveal the utility of the fully realized model in developing mutually reinforcing research, teaching, and practice skills, as well as illustrate how adopting a stronger practitioner focus may help to bring programs more into alignment with the field's practice orientation and aid in bridging the research-practice gap.

Keywords: social work doctoral education, scientist-practitioner, research practice gap

The field of social work has a long history of striving to infuse research into practice and practice into research (Zimbalist, 1977). As DePanfilis (2014) notes, one of the primary frameworks utilized towards this aim is the scientist-practitioner (S-P) model, which was initially popularized at the Boulder Conference for psychology in 1949 (see Raimy, 1950 for the full report from the conference). The model necessitates that social workers operate both as scientists *and* practitioners who infuse current research knowledge into practice, as well as utilize practice knowledge to guide critical appraisal and execution of research. The goal of the model is to create a feedback loop whereby knowledge gained from the two related but distinct roles inform and influence one another (Belar & Perry, 1992).

Although adoption of the S-P model to social work has not been without controversy (for example, see Epstein, 1996; Ivanoff, Blythe, & Briar, 1997; Thyer, 1997; and Wakefield & Kirk,

1996), concerted efforts have been made to instill the framework into both bachelor and master of social work (BSW; MSW) programs. These programs are designed to develop micro and macro level practitioners and traditionally have had a strong practitioner focus. As a result, efforts to adopt the S-P orientation at the bachelor and master's level have concentrated on enhancing the scientist aspect of the model. The increased focus on integrating the evidence-based practice model (EBP; see Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996; Gibbs, 2003; and Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004) into curriculums as well as on developing students' research skills both serve as examples of this trend at the BSW and MSW level. Despite these efforts, adoption of the model and particularly the practitioner aspect of the model is less evident at the doctoral level, where the focus often shifts to training future researchers and teachers. What follows is a reflection on my first year of doctoral education at a research-based university as it relates to the S-P model. My experiences reveal how the S-P model can help students to develop mutually reinforcing research, teaching, and practice skills, as well as demonstrate how adopting a stronger practitioner focus may bring programs more into alignment with the field's practice orientation and ultimately help to bridge the research-practice gap.

My Path to Doctoral Education

The S-P model in large part contributed to my decision to pursue a doctoral degree. Although a proponent of the framework, during my career as a community-based clinician I struggled to infuse current research into practice in the presence of numerous barriers (*e.g.,* lack of time due to high caseloads, lack of affordable training opportunities, and minimal access to recent literature). Over time I found myself posing questions deriving from my clinical work that I neither found addressed in the literature nor had the skills or means by which to investigate. And so, nine years after completing my MSW, I began doctoral education. Although I hoped to stay connected to the practice realm, I chose to pursue a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) rather than a Doctorate of Social Work (DSW; such as those offered at the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers's University) because of my desire to focus on developing research and teaching skills.

When I began exploring PhD programs, however, I was struck at the number of programs that made a point to remark that their course of study was not designed to improve practice skills. Citing the demands of doctoral education as the primary reason, many programs went so far as to discourage practice (or work of any kind) during the program. On the one hand this made sense insomuch as the programs were not focused on developing practitioners, but were instead aimed at developing researchers, teachers and scholars. Yet on the other hand these comments seemed unnecessarily to create a dichotomy: *why can't I do both?* What about the S-P model and social work's commitment to the application of knowledge to practice? Just as social work practitioners are called upon to infuse research into practice, so too shouldn't social work researchers and teachers be called upon to utilize practice knowledge to inform their roles? Further, don't these roles of teacher, researcher, and practitioner reinforce and enhance one another?

Nevertheless, the comments had their intended effect in that they caused me to seriously reflect on whether or not I was ready to shift the focus of my career from clinical work to the development of a different, albeit related skillset. I realized I would essentially be altering the path of my career and given my proclivity for clinical work, this was not a decision I took lightly. In fact, as I was not ready to altogether abandon clinical work and having never been

fond of what I perceived to be an either-or invalid disjunction, I chose a program geared towards research and teaching that also afforded me the opportunity to work at a translational research center as both a clinician and research assistant.

Social Work Doctoral Education: Where's the *Practitioner* Orientation?

All of this begs the question: what is the purpose of doctoral education in social work? and further, should practice be a part of social work doctoral education? Historically, the focus of doctoral education has been on preparing and creating what the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate labels "stewards of the discipline" who can generate new ideas, conserve key findings and core concepts, and transform knowledge through teaching and scholarship (Golde, 2012; Golde & Walker, 2006; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). However, as Anastas and Videka (2012) express, "social work is not just a discipline; it is also a practice profession," (p. 269) and as such doctoral education in social work must also focus on generating practice knowledge and effectiveness. In a similar vein, others have referred to the "enterprise" of social work, which includes the practice, discipline, and research tradition of the profession, and these authors have argued that doctoral education in social work must address all three areas in order to produce "stewards of the enterprise" (Anastas & Videka, 2012; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015).

The profession's emphasis on practice is evident in the revised quality guidelines set forth by the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE), a membership organization of social work doctoral programs in the United States. According to GADE, "PhD-trained social work scholars improve the art and science of social work by generating, disseminating, and conserving the knowledge that informs and transforms professional practice" (Harrington, Petr, Black, Cunningham-Williams, & Bentley, 2014, p. 282). Following from this aim, one might assume that practice experience is required in order to develop the skills necessary to generate, disseminate, and conserve knowledge that will inform and transform professional practice and that practice experience is therefore an essential and valued component of PhD social work programs. However, this does not always seem to be the case. While there have been concerted and successful efforts to bolster the research components of doctoral programs over the past several decades, this may have come at the expense of an emphasis on practice (Anastas, 2015; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015; Goodman, 2015). In fact, many doctoral programs have eliminated the admissions requirement that applicants have a MSW or any practice experience and practice content has declined markedly in the past several decades (Anastas, 2012; 2015; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015). More recently, PhD students in social work have reported that they felt their practice experience was either not appreciated or even devalued during their schooling (Anastas, 2012; Mendenhall, 2007).

The loosening of admissions criteria, decrease in practice content, and overall lack of emphasis on practice before or during doctoral education has led to criticisms that doctoral programs in social work are becoming increasingly detached from practice, are not sufficiently preparing students to teach future practitioners, and are not adequately training students to appreciate the complexities of real world practice and applied research (Anastas, 2014; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015; Fong, 2012; Goodman, 2015). It has also led Berzoff and Drisko (2015) to advocate for a more explicit focus on practice within the GADE guidelines.

Partially in response to the current focus on research in PhD social work programs and in order to accommodate practitioners who wish to acquire advanced training and knowledge but who do not want to discontinue their focus on direct practice work, there has been an emergence of DSW programs that follow a "practice doctorate" model (Anastas & Videka, 2012; National Association of Social Workers, 2014). These programs, which are still evolving, are distinct from traditional PhD programs in that they emphasize developing "practitioner scholars" and typically have an explicit focus on practice content, less of a focus on research content, and degree requirements that do not necessarily include a traditional dissertation (Anastas, 2015). While these programs will produce advanced "practitioner scholars" who may or may not go on to faculty positions in social work programs, the DSW education is not aimed at developing researchers. And, at least currently, the majority of those filling tenure track faculty positions are PhD-educated social workers who remain largely responsible for shaping practice through developing practice courses, providing intellectual leadership, and setting the practice research agenda (Berzoff & Drisko, 2015; Goodman, 2015).

Balancing the Scientist and Practitioner Role in Doctoral Education

Nevertheless, wanting to fulfill all three roles of practitioner, researcher, and teacher simultaneously has its challenges. Accordingly, during my first several months in the doctoral program I often lamented whether I had the time to continue with clinical work in light of my other responsibilities. I questioned whether I had taken on too much and if I had been unrealistic. *Maybe those doctoral program websites were right in discouraging practice during doctoral education*? These thoughts and doubts were fully realized when suddenly midway through my first semester, just as my coursework was becoming progressively taxing, my clinical caseload demanded increasing time and energy. Initially I found myself—as much as I hate to admit it—annoyed. I wanted to be spending my time developing research skills, but my time was frequently compromised by the needs of my clients. During those hours when I needed and wanted to be planning class lectures, learning statistical analyses, reading, and working on assignments, I instead found myself researching the literature regarding pressing clinical issues, contemplating how to best navigate them, and fielding related phone calls. And then, in the midst of an internal dialogue where my thoughts centered around the notion that trying to tackle all these different roles at once was too much and feeling as though I was doing everything sub-par, this thought popped into my head: *the reason I do this work—the research, the teaching, the study—is to help vulnerable children and families*. It is to touch their lives in a positive way, to help cultivate change, alleviate suffering, and battle oppression and injustice one tiny step at a time all in the midst of terribly flawed and complex systems. I am a social worker first. The clients with whom I work must remain the focus, for if they do not, then what is the worth of the research, the teaching and the scholarship?

The Value of Practice Experience

With this thought, I became incredibly grateful that I was afforded the opportunity to work clinically through the doctoral education process, and reflected on the ways in which it had impacted my research and teaching. Congruent with Thyer (2000) and Gambrill's (2001) observations on the value of practice experience for social work educators, I concluded that my clinical experience had undoubtedly positively influenced my work as both a budding teacher and researcher. Specifically, my clinical experience had enabled me to identify gaps in

understanding which informed research questions, helped me to recognize confounding factors, mediators and moderators of treatment, facilitated my ability to discern meaning from research findings, provided case examples to draw from when highlighting particularly nuanced concepts to students, and helped me to more skillfully teach the *process* aspects of therapy that can be so difficult to quantify but that are essential to developing practice skills.

Further and somewhat surprisingly given the many warnings to the contrary, my amateur experience as a researcher and teacher enhanced my clinical work. In fact, I realized that in the months since I had begun the program, my clinical skills had grown remarkably. In particular, my courses and research experiences provided new knowledge that enabled me to more skillfully conceptualize clients' problems and needs and provided me with new skills to more adeptly address them. Teaching was broadening my knowledge base as well—not wanting to limit students to my area of clinical specialization I sought out information on other populations, problems, theories and interventions. Additionally, concurrently conducting clinical work and research was providing rich opportunities to identify potential areas to study, illuminating possible solutions to clinical dilemmas, and providing insight into how to navigate the challenges of translational science. It also—importantly—revealed how interconnected these different roles are and how each one enhanced my competence in the others.

Social Work is a Practice Profession

Social work is fundamentally committed to social justice and embedded in that commitment is an obligation to constantly ask whether research pursuits will translate back into practice in a way that will benefit clients (Pollio, 2012). If the teaching, research, and scholarship are not ends unto themselves and the goal is the pursuit of knowledge *in order* to apply that knowledge to practice, then it is crucial to remember that underlying the work and the "publish or perish" mentality that often dominates academia, there are individuals with real problems and suffering. Social work practice is muddled with complexities and one simply can't learn how to navigate those complexities as a researcher or practitioner by reading a book, reviewing the literature, or taking a course. It requires *doing*. If students do not stay connected to practice, how else will they have opportunities to realize the difficulties, nuances, and issues inherent to social science research and help ensure research is relevant and applicable to the field? How else will they make meaningful sense of the data? How else will they teach future social workers to do the same? In comparing social work to other practice-oriented disciplines, Johnson and Munch (2010) point out:

> Are there professors of music who teach piano who have had no, or merely a few, lessons? They could teach the theory of music, perhaps, yet would they be able to teach the complex skills of playing the instrument? Would one trust a surgeon whose university professor had never conducted surgery? (p. 62)

The foundation of social work lies in a practice orientation, but this seems to get lost in PhD programs where the emphasis turns to research and, to a lesser degree, teaching. Practicum experience is understood to be a crucial element of BSW and MSW programs, but this focus is not readily apparent at the doctoral level although practice experience—and particularly the ability to anchor research and teaching in practice—remains important.

The consequences of the lack of explicit training in or focus on practice during doctoral education might be neutralized if students were entering programs with years of prior practice experience to draw upon. However, this does not seem to be the case as many doctoral programs have eliminated the admissions requirement that applicants have a MSW or practice experience (Anastas, 2012; 2015; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015). Given the lack of opportunities to continue developing practice skills during PhD programs and the declining focus on practice content, the unintended consequences of these changes may be increasing numbers of faculty with little to no practice experience, a shortage of faculty to teach practice courses, and an over-reliance on adjunct faculty who may be superb practitioners and teachers, but who typically have little bearing on course development or practice research agendas (Berzoff & Drisko, 2015; Goodman, 2015; Johnson & Munch, 2010; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004). Social work may end up with faculty who are "stewards of the discipline," but who are unable to be "stewards of the enterprise" which benefits neither students nor the profession (Anastas & Videka, 2012; Johnson & Munch, 2010). Further, the lack of emphasis on practice and certainly the reported devaluing of practice during doctoral education will also likely result in widening the research-practice gap by marginalizing the importance of practice experience and in effect encouraging a one-way relationship between research and practice (Berzoff & Drisko, 2015).

Putting the Practitioner Back into Doctoral Education

There are ways, however, to enhance the practitioner aspect of the S-P model in social work education. GADE has traditionally endorsed three models of doctoral education in social work: the traditional PhD model, which emphasizes scholarship and scientific research; the practice oriented doctorate, such as the newer DSW degrees being offered, which emphasize advanced practice skills, scholarship and, to a lesser degree, research; and the researcher/practitioner model (Shore, 1991). This last model emphasizes both advanced practice *and* scientific research in line with the S-P model. As Berzoff and Drisko (2015) note, this framework focuses on research and scholarship in the same way that the traditional PhD model does, but also includes education about and opportunities for advanced practice. Doctoral programs and students may greatly benefit by adopting this model.

Pollio (2012) also offers a doctoral training framework that encompasses *both* the scientist and practitioner aspects of the S-P model and his framework may also serve as a helpful means by which to enhance the practitioner focus in doctoral education. He builds on Brekke's (2012) efforts to shape a "science of social work" as well as the work of Fong (2012), who asserts that the purpose of doctoral education is to create scientists, not researchers or scholars. Fong (2012) discusses the intersection of basic and applied science as well as the intersection of research and practice and argues that the science of social work appreciates both research and practice while also being grounded in the values of social justice and diversity. Pollio (2012) extends this conceptualization and differentiates social work doctoral education from other scientific disciplines when he writes, "the purpose of the doctoral education process is not to train scientists, but to uniquely train social work scientists" (p. 538). He argues that developing a science of social work demands that social work scientists have a firm foundation of practice experience, a strong understanding of social work as a discipline *and* as a profession, a commitment to social justice and issues related to diversity, engagement in change efforts, and an obligation to research topics which have real world implications (Pollio, 2012).

Yet another way to strengthen the practitioner focus in doctoral education is for programs to more overtly encourage practice experience and provide increased opportunities to engage in practice in real-world settings during the course of the program. If students are interested in researching community advocacy then they are somehow involved in *doing* community advocacy work on their issue of interest; if they are interested in clinical research, then they are involved in *conducting* clinical work; if they are interested in studying a certain issue or population, then they are involved in *working* with that issue or population; and so on. In line with the translational science framework (Brekke, Ell, & Palinka, 2007), practice work could be conducted in tandem with research on the issue in order to more fully realize the interconnectedness of the practitioner and researcher roles. Similarly, Fong (2014) has pointed out that practice-based research, intervention research, and community-based participatory action research all share a theoretical framework that interweaves and brings together research and practice.

Finally, social work doctoral programs could consider the methodological training that students receive and how it might encourage or discourage the S-P model. Goodman (2015) suggests that practice and research cannot be unified without attention to methodology and argues that doctoral students must become "methodological pluralists" who are competent in a variety of scientific approaches that are compatible with applied research, as opposed to being indoctrinated into one method that may have limited real-world application. Several others have agreed, and have advocated for methodological plurism in working to bridge the gap between practice and research (Anastas, 2012; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015; Pollio, 2012).

Conclusions

The trend in social work PhD-level doctoral education has been to increasingly emphasize the scientist aspect of the S-P model at the expense of the practitioner aspect of the model. Mendenhall (2007) observed how new doctoral students are often inculcated to identify as researchers *instead of* practitioners and how integration of both roles is not encouraged, which often leads to role discontinuity. However, if doctoral education in social work is going to succeed in creating "stewards of the enterprise," then there needs to be a focus on the practice, discipline, *and* research traditions of social work (Anastas & Videka, 2012; Berzoff & Drisko, 2015).

The research-practice gap has been widely discussed within social work and the broader social sciences for decades. In the field and in academia there are biases and perceptual blocks regarding the other which far too often serve as barriers to effective research, teaching, and practice. In order for the feedback loop envisioned by the S-P model to work effectively, one needs skills in all realms. The S-P model cannot be a one-way relationship whereby practitioners are called upon to have research knowledge and skills, but researchers are not called upon to have practice knowledge and skills. The model simply does not work that way and the feedback loop envisioned falls limp. The various roles can co-exist and be mutually advantageous and doctoral students might greatly benefit from experiencing the interplay between the different roles. As Rubin and Babbie (2014) write:

> …the quality of social work research produced ultimately depends not just on the researchers' methodological expertise, but also on their practice knowledge and on

practitioners' research knowledge. Without a partnership…there is not likely to be a
climate of support in agencies for the type of research our field desperately needs. (p. 20)

With the profession's strong practice orientation and ever developing scientific tradition, there is
consensus that social work is both an art and a science (Brekke, 2012). In this way, social work
is uniquely situated to be a leader in helping to bridge the research-practice gap. If social work
can resist the urge to fall into reductionism and not subscribe to the myth that research and
practice are mutually exclusive and instead can model and nurture in students the ability to
integrate multiple roles, then perhaps the S-P model can be fully realized at all levels of
education. By providing opportunities to increase practice experience during doctoral education,
particularly under the translational science framework, programs can help to bring the imbalance
between science and practice more into alignment and in the process also develop "stewards of
enterprise" who are social work scientists capable of conducting relevant and rigorous research,
teaching the next generation of practitioners, and providing intellectual leadership in a manner
that is in accordance with the profession's values.

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