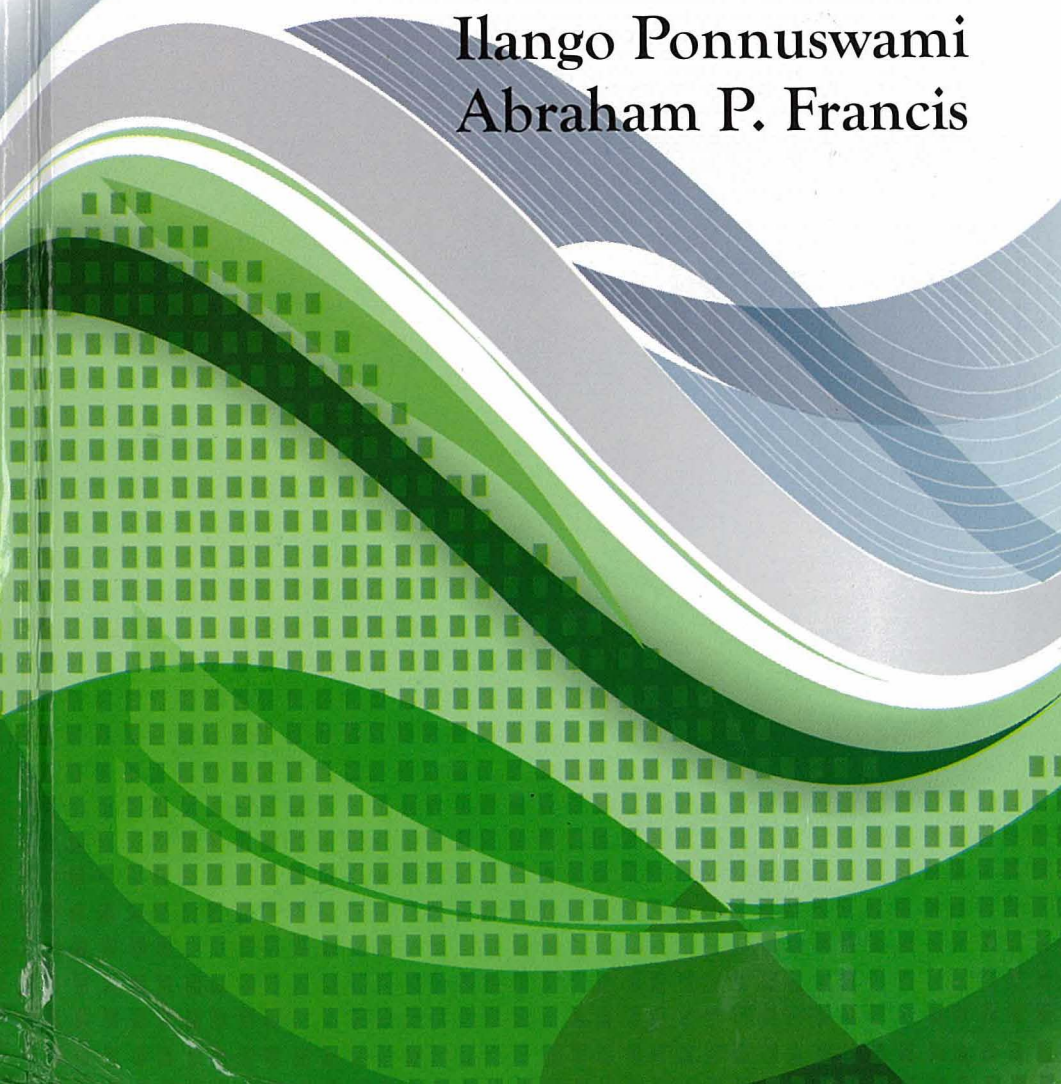


PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

Research Perspectives

Ilango Ponnuswami
Abraham P. Francis



Professional Social Work

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Edited by

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Introduction: Professional Social Work— Research Perspectives

—Ilango Ponnuswami and Abraham P. Francis

SOCIAL WORK AND ITS SCIENTIFIC ROOTS

Social work has reached a significant developmental milestone in its professional identity as it collectively celebrates over a century of professional practice world over that targets individual and societal transformation (Popple & Leighninger, 2007). In India, the profession is all set to celebrate its Platinum Jubilee completing seventy five years of existence and growth. Historically, social workers have used a combination of research and practice strategies to advocate for improved social conditions for underserved populations, such as the poor, immigrants, political refugees, child abuse victims, and criminal offenders (Day, 2008; Maschi, Bradley, & Ward, 2009). Research and evaluation comprise a central feature of social work practice that can foster and appraise the profession's progress toward its mission (Wronka, 2008). Research and evaluation are important because they give social workers permission to be curious and creative, as well as systematic and thorough in their activities that involve assessment, prevention, and intervention efforts with individuals, families, and communities. The term research generally refers to a systemic and thorough search or examination that involves the collection of data (Engel & Schutt, 2010). As a verb, research often refers to conducting an exhaustive investigation. The term evaluation often refers to the careful appraisal and study about the

effectiveness of an intervention (Barker, 2003). The use of the scientific methods with the distinct purpose of generating information to apply to practice has historically made social work research and evaluation unique.

FUNCTIONS OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

Although some aspects of social work practice are an art, science and research comprise an essential component of social work practice activities (Kirk & Reid, 2002). Reid (1997) articulated three major functions for social work practice. First, scientific perspectives and methods can provide a framework for practice activities and help obtain the best results possible. It is a way of thinking that offers strategies for action. According to Reid (1997): Such an orientation calls for the use of concepts that are clearly tied to empirical events; the systematic collection of data; the cautious use of inference and the consideration of alternative explanations; the application when possible, of research-based knowledge, and the discriminating evaluation of the outcomes of one's efforts. (p. 2040) Second, research is an essential tool toward building knowledge that can be used for practice. Research can serve as a generative tool to develop and refine theories for practice and can be used to evaluate practice effectiveness. When knowledge is empirically grounded, it strengthens practice decisions. Third, research serves a practical function for social workers in the field, to evaluate their own practice with individuals, agencies, or communities. It is common for social workers to conduct needs assessment, quality assurance, program and practice evaluation, productivity studies, and program evaluation. Data gathered for specific practice situations can be used to make practice decisions and actions.

The professional social work organization, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2010), underscores the diversity of social issues addressed in social work research and its benefits. Social work research targets an array of psychosocial problems; prevention and intervention efforts; and community, organizational, policy, and administrative concerns. Some areas of research for practice include research on mental health, child maltreatment, community violence, HIV/AIDS,

juvenile delinquency, productive aging, substance abuse, and international community development. Other areas of research address risk and resilience, such as community violence, among individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, and society to generate information that can be used to develop or refine practice. Other areas of research examine the effectiveness of service delivery and public policies, achieving human and community well-being and social and economic justice. Moreover, these areas of research can be used to benefit stakeholders that include consumers, practitioners, policy makers, educators, and society.

FURTHERING RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND ADVOCACY INTEGRATION

As illustrated by past social work leaders, social work intervention successes consistently comprised an integrated approach to facilitating change. This integrated approach of research-practice-advocacy was part and parcel of individual practitioners or practitioners in collaboration with other interested stakeholders to work toward individual and social/political-level change. Historically, social workers have assisted individuals and families to improve their psychosocial functioning through casework and clinical practice. Additionally, they have combated unjust and unfair societal conditions through legal and policy advocacy, such as for women's and children's rights (Bartlett, 1958, 1970; Zimbalist, 1977).

Many social workers may be less aware of the historic role of scientific inquiry and its function in developing and improving practice and advocacy efforts at an individual, community, and societal level. In fact, students and practitioners often are initially drawn to the social work profession because of a strong desire to help others and/or to combat societal injustice and the unfair treatment of individuals or groups (Grobman, 2004, 2005; Le Croy, 2006; Limb & Organista, 2003). A host of social work activities, such as research, clinical practice, community organizing, program administration, and advocacy, can be viewed as a means to this

end (Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993; Butler, 1990; D'Aprix, Dunlap, Able, & Edwards, 2004). In fact, progress toward social work's mission of promoting well-being and just outcomes appears to be most effective when research and practice aims are coordinated.

Social work students often embrace practice activities, such as clinical and community practice, but are unsure of the role of research and evaluation activities in the promotion of well-being, human rights, and social justice (Bogo et al., 1993; Butler, 1990; D'Aprix et al., 2004). In their social work educational experience, research coursework is often a new experience, and many students approach it with trepidation (Epstein, 1987; Maschi et al., 2007). However, evidence suggests that with increased exposure to the research and involvement in projects, the use of research and practice evaluation strategies becomes a seamless part of the social work students' and practitioners' knowledge, values, and skill set (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005).

Integration of research into professional practice and action is essential for social work. It is composed of a practice trinity of practitioner-researcher-activist. The term trinity is used to represent three closely related activities of practice, research, and activism in which the boundaries are often blurred. We refer to integration of these activities in combination of parts that work together well. When these activities are in alignment, great strides are made in advocating at the individual and community levels for individual and social change. This integration must occur within individual practitioners, as well as the profession as a whole.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

Social work research benefits consumers, practitioners, policy-makers, educators, and the general public through the examination of societal issues such as: health care, substance abuse, and community violence; family issues, including child welfare and aging; well-being and resiliency; and the strengths and needs of underserved populations. By exploring the social, behavioral, and environmental connections to health and

mental health issues, social work research identifies strategies and solutions that enhance individual, family and community well being. By conducting research in schools, communities, health care facilities, and human service agencies, social work researchers are able to examine the inter-relationships among individuals, families, neighborhoods, and social institutions. Social work research provides empirical support for best practice approaches to improve service delivery and public policies.

WHY DO WE NEED SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

Social work research informs professional practice. Through social work research, the profession can:

- Assess the needs and resources of people in their environments
- Evaluate the effectiveness of social work services in meeting peoples needs
- Demonstrate relative costs and benefits of social work services
- Advance professional education in light of changing contexts for practice
- Understand the impact of legislation and social policy on the clients and communities we serve

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) is a process in which the practitioner combines well-researched interventions with clinical experience and ethics, and client preferences and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services. The practitioner, researcher and client must work together in order to identify what works, for whom and when. For this, first of all, we need to clarify what professional social work is. Social work is professional commitment to seek social justice and improve the standard of the living for the poor and needy. Now a days, there are many social work organizations that operate all around the world. There are three types of social workers those who work directly for the state (usually

as a part of the child welfare system - adoptions, foster care, etc.). The second are those that work for private non-profits that are licensed by the state. The third are those that work for international organizations such as adoption agencies.

Social work research addresses psychosocial problems, preventive interventions, treatment of acute and chronic conditions, and community, organizational, policy and administrative issues. Social work bases its methodology on a methodical body of evidence-based knowledge consequent from research and practice evaluation, as well as general and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. It recognizes the difficulty of relations between human beings and their environment, and the capacity of people both to be affected by and to alter the multiple influences upon them including biopsychosocial factors. The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behavior and social systems to analyze complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational, social and cultural changes.

A recent publication examines trends in international social work research as reflected in social work research journals from 1995 to 2004. It is based on 707 articles from 3 major American Social Work Research Journals: *Social Work Research*, *Journal of Social Service Research*, and *Research on Social Work Practice*. It explores both shifts in the amount of domestic and international research, and 3 types of international social work research (supranational, intranational, and transnational). The findings showed that out of the 707 articles, 567 (80.2%) were research articles. Of these, 532 (93.8%) were domestic research articles and 35 (6.2%) were international research articles. There was a considerable increase (3.5%) in the total amount of research articles. Specifically, there was a higher increase in international social work research (2.8%) compared to national social work research (0.8%). Comparing the two 5-year time periods, during 1995-1999 there were 12 international articles and during 2000-2004 there were 23 international articles, representing an increase of more than 90%. Among international social work research, the highest increase was for supranational research articles (2.4%), followed by

intranational research (0.7%), but there was a slight decrease in transnational research (-0.4%). The authors discuss the decline in transnational or comparative research, which involves cooperation and collaboration of researchers between countries, and expressed their hope that this type of research will increase in the next decade.

Another article reports a study assessing the contribution of current social work journal publications to a cumulative body of research that is capable of informing interventions. Thirteen journals published from 1993 to mid-1997 were reviewed. Analysis was guided by the view that the focus and design of studies should correspond to and supply the knowledge needed to perform different practice tasks. Accordingly, journal research articles were classified by their potential contribution to practice decisions requiring descriptive, explanatory, or control knowledge. Research aiming at control knowledge, informing the selection and implementation of interventions, was further evaluated by whether the interventions and outcomes studied were sufficiently specified to permit reliable research replication and application in practice. Very few of the published articles were found to report research on interventions, and even fewer used designs that enable replication. Factors affecting the rate and quality of research and interventions are also discussed (Rosen et al).

Social work has long been concerned with strengthening the extent to which its research is capable of informing and guiding practice (see Greenwood, 1957; Kadushin, 1959; Kane, 1982). Over the years increasing attention has been directed toward this purpose. This attention resulted in the founding in the 1970s of the first two journals dedicated to publishing research (Social Work Research & Abstracts and the Journal of Social Service Research) and the founding about 20 years later of a journal dedicated to research on practice (Research on Social Work Practice). These advances notwithstanding, concern persists that social work researchers are not meeting the needs of practitioners. Such concern was reflected in the convening of a symposium in 1996 on psychosocial intervention research, cosponsored by the Institute for the Advancement of Social

Work Research and the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research at the National Institutes of Health, as well as in the publication of a special issue on intervention research in the journal *Social Work Research* (September 1997).

Emanating from similar concerns, this article reviews current publications in social work and assesses their potential in contributing to a body of knowledge of effective interventions. This review is based on the premise that social work practice must adhere to and be guided by effectiveness criteria. That is, interventions should be selected and used on the basis of their empirically demonstrated effectiveness. Because journal publications are a major vehicle for accumulating and disseminating professional knowledge, they constitute a primary source of guidance for practice. Accordingly, the authors examined the current research published in social work journals in relation to its potential for contributing to effective practice.

The movement towards developing practice more firmly grounded on empirical research has, arguably, been one of the most significant international trends in social work during the past decade. However, in the UK the implications of this trend for pedagogical practices and the design of educational programmes have still to be fully explored. This paper reports on the findings of a repeated cross-sectional survey of MSW students in Queen's University Belfast which focused on their perceptions of the value of research training to professional practice. The study, conducted over a four year period, explored students' awareness of the relationship between research and practice and their readiness to engage with research training. The findings suggested that the majority of students perceived research training as a valuable component of professional development. However, the study also found a level of skepticism among students about its practical utility along with some resistance towards actively embracing a research agenda. The paper evaluates the significance of these findings for developing research and evidence-based practice as integral components of the new degrees in social work in the UK and for social work education programmes in other countries aiming to develop research-minded practice.

A very recent book entitled *Social Work Practice Research for the Twenty-first Century* (Fortune et al, 2010), incorporating the concerns of a new century into a consideration of models for practice research, builds on the visionary work of William J. Reid (1928-2003) who transformed social work research through empirically based and task-centered approaches-and, more recently, synthesized intervention knowledge for framing future study. This collection reviews the task-centered model and other contemporary Evidence-Based Practice models for working with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. Essays demonstrate the value of these pragmatic approaches in the United States and international settings. Contributors summarize state-of-the-art methods in several key fields of service, including children and families, aging, substance abuse, and mental health. They also evaluate the research movement itself, outlining an agenda for today's sociopolitical landscape and the profession. This volume inspires practice research to prioritize evidence as a base for the profession.

Another interesting study by Tolman and Molidor examines a decade of social work group outcome research. Fifty-four group research studies were identified in nine key social work journals and from *Social Work Research and Abstracts*. Methodological aspects of the studies were reviewed including theoretical orientation, group format, leadership, design, target problem or area, and measurement. Results of the review indicate that investigations of cognitive-behavioral groups dominate the research literature. Although a wide array of target problems have been studied, children's social skills and behavior problems are the most frequently examined. Among the markers of increasing methodological sophistication of the group research literature were balancing of group leadership across comparison group conditions and the use of multiple measures for determining outcome. Although experimental studies were the most frequent design used, they were outnumbered by the combination of quasi-experimental group comparisons and nonexperimental designs.

THE INDIAN SCENARIO

With the mushrooming of social work institutes and departments in colleges and universities, more and more students, teachers and practitioners are pursuing research either as an academic requirement (that too, partial!) for obtaining research degrees or undertaking research projects and publications as mere requirements for career advancement. This upsurge has adversely affected the quality of research both in terms of the methodologies employed and in terms of the research outcomes. These days, more institutions have started offering research programmes in social work (universities have also granted them recognition) even though they do not have proper facilities such as library, internet, online databases etc., besides having inexperienced faculty with very limited research involvement.

In India, in the recent years, there has been a craze for M.Phil as a pre-doctoral research programme. While on the one hand, it is good for fresh social work graduates to have some grounding in research methodology, mindless expansion and even offering M.Phil through distance mode have all lead to serious degradation of the quality of research. Certainly compared to the earlier decades of social work training and practice in India, more advanced methodologies are being used by social work researchers. For example, those days, data analysis was done manually and limited to basic statistical applications like percentage analysis, chi-square, t-test and diagrammatic representation of data using histograms, bar diagrams or pie charts. But, these days, even a young social work trainee uses (or at least gets done) advanced statistical packages and software such as SPSS.

While extensive (rather indiscriminate!) use of advanced statistical tools might be creating an impression that social work research is increasingly becoming more 'scientific', the almost complete reliance upon quantitative techniques with near total neglect of qualitative methods is a matter of serious concern. The statistical packages that are in vogue today have lead to more stereotyping of social work research processes and outcomes without much scope for originality of thinking,

creativity, innovation and practical utility. When we were social work students in the early eighties, there were no computers and hence we had to do all our data analysis and writing manually which was in a way good since we were able to understand what we were doing, experience the art of scientific writing and even typing, proofreading and all kinds of work. The extensive use of computers (rather, complete dependency on computers) for data analysis, review of literature and report writing have certainly made the job a lot easier but has taken away the benefits of learning and real skill development through the hard way.

Web-based resources are increasingly being used by social work researchers these days. But, a disturbing trend is the almost total neglect of actually referring to books and journals in the libraries and complete dependency on web-based resources. Besides, there is also the problem of taking web resources as they are and considering them to be valid sources. We all know that not all web content are reliable and valid. Search engines and online databases are a boon to social work researchers of this era. Unbelievably enormous quantity of information and data can be accessed with the help of these search engines. Review of literature work has become rather easy these days with this excellent technology. With the advent of e-journals and e-books and article publishing portals, compared to earlier times, now, there are more avenues for dissemination of research findings. However, social work researchers need to be cautious in submitting their research articles to e-journals and publishing portals as there are many commercial ventures out there trying to 'sell' research articles and make enormous amounts of money without paying any royalty to the authors.

Increased reliance on research by policy makers and programme planners these days is a welcome trend. Many government programmes enlist the services of professional social workers or organizations to carry out systematic and scientific studies to assess the needs and problems of specific communities or user groups, monitor the quality and quantity of services rendered and even evaluate project outcomes. One

of the most serious limitations of social work research in the country is the rather too much of use of cross-sectional studies rather than longitudinal studies. Most of the academic research studies leading to research degrees or general surveys and their practical utility is questionable. Besides, there is a serious lack of evidence-based research in the field of social work which is probably due to the lack of evidence-based practice in the first place. This is rather serious since the status of the profession is very much tied to these two crucial aspects.

Another major lacunae is the lack of innovation in terms of social work research methodologies employed by researchers in different settings. Studies are merely repetitive in different locations. Lack of scientific rigor among social work researchers is a matter of serious concern since there is such a wide gap between the situation here and elsewhere in the world with reference to quality and standards of social work research and publications. Another major problem is too much or to be more accurate, almost complete reliance on statistics, especially use of statistical packages (software) has resulted in stereotyped patterns and outcomes of research studies. With the extensive use of computers for data analysis, social workers have lost the opportunities to manually carry out statistical operations and learn so much and develop proper perspectives about research outcomes.

Lack of originality and rampant plagiarism in the scientific social work publications have been blocking the progress of social work research in the country. One of the major drawbacks is the lack of standard peer-reviewed publications in the field of social work. There are just a handful of good quality peer-reviewed social work journals. Many social work research studies are never published since there is a serious lack of 'publication culture' among professional social workers. While some social work faculty get their research papers published (at least for the sake of fulfilling requirements for their own career advancement), most of the social work practitioners in the field do not care much to write and publish (even though they might have made very valuable contributions to different client-groups).

Generally in India, ethical review mechanisms and regulations are not very effectively followed in most of the behavioural and social science research studies unlike research in the field of medicine or biotechnology. No ethical review mechanisms have been established for different categories of social work research which raises serious human rights concerns. One of the main reasons for this is the absence of a truly national level professional body and the non-existence of a Council for social work education for accrediting social work educational institutions and licensing professional social workers. Even a national level registry of social work research studies or any such thing because of which there is so much of repetition and duplication of social work research studies in the country.

On the positive side, in the recent years many recognized research centers have come up for organized social work research leading to research degrees like M.Phil or Ph.D all over the country (may be with the exception of certain regions). Associated with this is the enormous growth in terms of the number of recognized research guides or supervisors available. This expansion has led to the induction of a large number of research scholars in the field of social work. With the mushrooming of institutions offering social work education, there is also an ever-increasing demand for research degrees among the young faculty members foraying into the field. Another welcome trend is the recent spurt of social work conferences, seminars and workshops culminating in the publication of indigenous literature in the form of 'Conference Proceedings' or even edited volumes of fairly good quality.

However, there are some threats as well. The 'still undecided' issue of social work through distance mode creates in our minds a fear as to whether research as a tradition in social work education would be maintained or may be, due to practical difficulties, discarded from the curricular requirements. Even if it is continued, there are serious concerns regarding the quality of research guidance and supervision which raises serious questions about the quality of research training and research output of those involved. Generally, social

research or research in social sciences has not been patronized much by our governments and more particularly, there are no specific funding schemes for social work research. Then there is a blurring of professional boundaries these days among social science disciplines in India which makes it very difficult to have specific research areas for social work. Quite a number of social work research areas are being encroached upon by other related professions.

CONCLUSION

A careful analysis of the present trends in social work research reveals that there are encouraging and healthy developments on the one side and almost seemingly insurmountable challenges facing social work researchers. What is needed in the present scenario is a serious and careful review of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats relating to social work research in the country. After a collective 'audit' by the professional social work fraternity, serious effort has to be taken to establish a national council for social work education, corresponding state level councils with statutory powers, creation of a national registry or index of social work research, establishment and strengthening professional bodies with a federation approach at different levels, funding organizations and specific funding schemes for social work research and launching and sustenance of good quality peer-reviewed and indexed social work journals and enhancement of publication culture among social work educators, practitioners and students.

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