

**Research and Research Training in Social Work:
Climate, Connections, and Competencies**

Enola K. Proctor

Professor

George Warren Brown School of Social Work

Washington University

St. Louis, Missouri 63130

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Increasingly, the social work profession seems to accept the value of research. We are persuaded that the knowledge is the necessary foundation for our interventions, the stimulus for quality teaching, and the source of credibility, authority, and stature of our profession (Lindsey, 1992; Hopps & Gambrill, 1988; Fraser, 1993; Wodarski, 1991). We recognize that "the profession can achieve excellence only to the extent that its knowledge base is constantly tested, extended, and refined (Task Force on Quality in Graduate Social Work Education, page 12, 1984).

Yet the profession continues to suffer a dearth of sufficient, relevant, and quality research. The Task Force on Social Work Research (1991) reports that in a profession with over 400,000 practitioners and 4200 educators, fewer than 900 individuals have published any research since 1985. Even among university-based social work faculties, Corcoran et al. (1987) observe that despite an increasing academic orientation, most social work educators seem not to have yet accepted the traditional university norms of scholarly productivity. "Research has repeatedly shown that most social work educators do not publish, and those who do, publish very little. . . The publication pattern that emerges suggests a small group of highly productive faculty are responsible for the majority of publications." (Corcoran et al., 1987, page 232). Other studies support the conclusion that while a small number of social work doctorates report high levels of productivity, many produce little or no research; indeed nearly half were found not to have published in social work journals (Green, Hutchison, & Sar, 1992).

This paper focuses on factors which, in my view, are necessary to move our profession toward the development of more and better research. Although we seem to know more about who is productive among social work research faculties (e.g., rating studies of productivity) than we do about factors associated with the quantity and quality of those publications, some directions are clear.

My experiences in doctoral education and my efforts to launch a social work research development center over the past three years convince me that quality research and quality research training require three factors that too often are lacking in schools of social work. I am persuaded that our present deficiencies in research production are a function, in part, of, first, climates that are unsupportive of research; second, lack of connections to the disciplines and researchers in those disciplines; and, third, limited competence for research. Yet because each of these factors is malleable, I am optimistic. I believe that, with reasonable efforts, we as individual faculty scholars and our faculties as collectives can enhance our climate, connections, and competencies. Through such efforts, I believe that social work can reclaim its responsibility and potential for scholarship, in sufficient quality and sufficiency to guide and inform our profession's response to pressing social concerns.

CLIMATE

First, a climate that values and supports research is critical. Such a climate is critical for social work faculties, for students considering or having chosen social work as a profession, and for social work practitioners in agencies.

The climate for faculty research. Regarding faculty, the climate in social work education must ensure that research is valued, time for its conduct is protected, and individual and organizational resources undergird it. Social work

faculty too often face workloads in which each working minute and every ounce of energy are consumed by responsibilities for teaching, advising, monitoring field performance, service to school and university committees, consultation to community agencies, and curriculum design. Research has been regarded as the "idiosyncratic activity of individual faculty members" (Austin, 1993). Educational and service responsibilities neither can nor should be shirked in university-based, professional education. Yet quality scholarship cannot be fitted into "catch-as-catch-can" moments, nor relegated to weekend or late night hours. Our neglect of scholarship extracts a heavy toll: it undermines the profession's stature, the authority of our interventions, and the certainty of our teaching.

Studies confirm the role of climate in facilitating research. According to Corcoran et al., "the total university must be committed to, and contribute to research efforts. Exhortations to publish, rigorous tenure reviews, scholastic expectations: these are fine, but social work educators, like their colleagues in other disciplines, must have the required support" (1987, page 240). Their study revealed tangible support to be predictive of a composite measure of scholarship productivity; the critical ingredients included computer support, clerical services, training experiences, and internal funding to support pilot or developmental research. Similarly, Wodarski (1991) describes a program of building university research to include social reinforcers (e.g. recognition of research accomplishments), release time, and incentives. In short, departments and schools must create climates which value and, therefore, protect the time and energy required for scholarship. Deans and directors need to boldly and repeatedly remind the faculty that knowledge is prized, and knowledge-generating activities are to be protected. Enhancing the profession's knowledge must be central to the mission of social work education.

The climate for students. Our student, too, need a climate that prizes knowledge development. Research should be lifted up to undergraduate and graduate students as a legitimate--indeed lofty--career activity in social work. Social work is a profession, not a social science discipline, and the opportunity to help--to practice-- is appropriately emphasized as a reason students for career consideration and selection. Yet I fear, inadvertently, we may shortchange the profession and deter many talented individuals when we neglect to also emphasize the exciting career opportunities in knowledge-generation. Such neglect may lead undergraduates who aspire to contribute to knowledge about intractable social problems of homelessness, poverty, mental disorder, problems of public health, family conflict to look to other disciplines. I fear that the models of social work we present may carry the message--albeit implicit--that those wish to administer or treat may come to social work, but those who want to learn and discover--to research and report--should go elsewhere. By default, we may send to other disciplines--to sociology, to political science, to economics, to psychology, to psychiatry talented, inquisitive young people who want to add to what we know about poverty, homelessness, the effectiveness of family therapy, health and mental health service delivery. I believe that social work must recruit, must retain, must inspire and challenge those who are concerned about the need to know--to know the extent of problems and the effectiveness of solutions.

Studies confirm the critical role of climate in shaping our students' career objectives. Fraser, Jenson, & Lewis (1991) found that a climate in which faculty members engage in funded research contributes to students' selection of research as a career activity (Fraser, Jenson, & Lewis, 1991). In turn, doctoral students who proclaim research as a career objective have been found more productive (Green, Hutchison, & Sar, 1992). And even for students who desire to practice

rather than become researchers, Penka & Kirk (1991) urge schools of social work to help them perceive the importance of accountability and objective methods of evaluating clinical practice. The challenges of direct practice can be seen in relation to methods of systematic inquiry.

The climate for research in agencies. Finally, a climate which values research is critical for agencies. Agencies should value evaluation, and provide time, recognition, and support to the clinicians who undertake it (Penka & Kirk, 1991) and desire to access and use it. The production of research in social service agencies is strongly related to organizational characteristics: social service departments in university-affiliated hospitals were found more likely to conduct research than were similar departments in non affiliated hospitals, and social work administrators cited lack of staff time as the major impediment to conducting research (Cook, Freedman, Evans, Rodell, & Taylor, 1992). Research productivity in agencies further has been shown to relate to such organizational and expectational variables as the presence of an agency library, the research involvement of peers within the organization, and the administrative regulations about worker involvement in education and consultation (Connaway, Morelock, & Gentry, 1985). Connaway et al. (1995) conclude that "the amount of research produced in the field may be increased by expecting workers to engage in it as part of their job descriptions." (page 89).

Thus, for social work faculties, for students in schools of social work, and for agency based workers, studies show that the conduct of research is dependent upon a conducive climate--a climate in which inquiry is expected, necessary supports are provided, and time is protected.

CONNECTIONS

The conduct of social work research also requires stronger and more extensive connections. I propose that social work researchers require better connections to practice, to the disciplines, to other researchers, and to potential funders of research.

Connections between research and practice. First, the connections between research and practice. Connections between research and practice are essential for the very conduct of studies, as well as to ensure the relevance and ultimate use of findings in informing social work practice. This paper neither requires nor could contain a recitation of the all-familiar commentary about the frequent irrelevance of research for practice, or the disinterest among practitioners for research. This paper, instead, focuses on the importance of strengthening the connections between agencies and schools--the latter being the site expected to be where most social work research is produced.

Few schools of social work have ongoing research partnerships with agencies (Task Force Report, page 63). This may not be surprising, given that schools, and not most agencies, have the expertise, culture, and resources for research. Agencies, on the other hand, have the need and the raw materials--client problems, practice, and data. Thus one barrier to research may be structural. If so, the development of linkages, to ensure the necessary sharing of expertise and resources, is necessary.

One of the major recommendations of the NIMH supported Task Force on Social Work Research (1991) is "increased support for research development in social work education programs, including collaborative research partnerships with service agencies." (page x). That is, schools of social work should establish programs to develop on-going research partnerships with agencies, providing agency staff with technical assistance about research problems. In turn, agencies should provide research opportunities for faculty and students.

Prominent among the comments of social work faculty endeavoring to develop proposals for NIMH supported social work research development centers were concerns about how to link their schools with mental health service providers. Schools seem not to know the priorities and concerns of mental health agencies, particularly public agencies, nor how to work with them in developing a research agenda.

The mental health literature offers a number of collaboration models, in recognition of and in response to the need for connections between academic research environments and service agencies. These include the linchpin PAL model; the Kansas Technical Assistance project, and the Galt visiting scholar model (Godard & Hargrove, 1991; Sullivan & Rapp, 1991; Yank, Fox, & Davis, 1991).

Our school's experience with our NIMH supported Center for Mental Health Services Research indicates a keen appetite among local agencies for such collaboration. Following public announcement of our center's establishment, our files began to overflow with invitations from agencies to include them in our projects examining the access, coordination, and effectiveness of mental health services. Agency administrators, state policy chiefs, and direct service providers have been eager to both share their perspectives on pressing concerns in service delivery and to open the doors of their agencies to our investigators. I suspect this appetite prevails elsewhere, as well. Following conference presentations of our hospital based research on discharge planning and post-hospital care, agency workers often ask my colleagues and I how they can interest social work faculty members in conducting studies in their own locales. I find this paradoxical, given the concurrent frustrations expressed by faculty members seeking connections to practice for their research.

Connections to the disciplines. A second critical connection is that between social work research and the disciplines. Connections to other disciplines are critical for the conduct of research and for the training of doctoral students.

The inclusion of interdisciplinary and, particularly, behavioral science content, is critical to doctoral education in social work (Rosen and Stretch, 1978; GADE, 1992), as well as in other fields (Aiken et al., 1990). A statement adopted by the membership of GADE (1992) and endorsed by the National Association of Deans and Directors proclaims substantive and theoretical interdisciplinary content to be an essential component of high quality doctoral education. Doctoral curricula should require specialized study in at least one discipline.

Yet currently, doctoral education evidences too little in the way of interdisciplinary connections. In 1989, 15% of doctoral programs were structurally interdisciplinary, and fewer than one-third of programs required social science content either within or without the program (Kronick et al., 1989). Yet those programs with such requirements, and particularly with structural ties to the disciplines appeared to be the strongest, perhaps, according to Kronick et al. (1989), because their students must meet the standards of other departments.

In the conduct of research, too, it is clear that interdisciplinary "partners bring different strengths and knowledge bases to the enterprise and thus extend each other's reach." (Keohane, page 106). But in spite of early recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives and connections (e.g., Stein & Cloward, 1958), social work researchers may have become more insular, infrequently working in collaboration with investigators from other disciplines. According to a recent study, only about half of all schools of social work report any collaboration between their faculty and investigators of other disciplines (Berg-Weger & Schneider, 1994). Accordingly, we should not be surprised that most schools have found problematic the NIMH requirement for social work

research development centers to house substantial interdisciplinary involvement. Indeed one of the major impediment to schools' success at preparing compelling proposals for social work research development centers has been their inability to forge interdisciplinary collaborations. According to Kathleen Ell, recent social work IPA at the NIMH, most first-time Center proposals provide, at best, for superficial involvement of sociologists, psychiatrists, epidemiologists, economists, biostatisticians, supported at a minimal (3-5%) level (Ell, 1994). Most social work schools and departments lacked either long-standing or current relationships with other disciplines. Social work faculty appear not to know investigators across their campus, nor across the street. NIMH staff have found themselves faced with the need to inform schools of social work who, on their own campuses, are currently conducting mental health research (Ell, 1994). Social work investigators have found it difficult to move beyond superficial, or "window-dressing" lists of interprofessional teams (Kane, 1975) to forge authentic, partnership collaborations.

Establishing interdisciplinary ties require considerable investment; relationships must be cultivated and nurtured with a long-view. Administrative supports are required to sustain interdisciplinary ties (Bracht and Briar, 1979).

Yet the potential yield from these collaborations is invaluable. Particularly in the area of measurement, an interdisciplinary approach is critical. In health and mental health services research, I have found that studies attempting to attribute variance to psychosocial variables must rigorously measure and control diagnosis, severity of illness, and compliance with medical regimes. Indeed, with rare exception, my first submissions of research proposals elicit reviewer observation that my measures need to be enhanced; such methodological enhancements invariably lead me to collaborations with dietitians, cardiologists, and psychiatrists. In turn, such collaborations have not only strengthened my study

designs, but also enhanced my opportunities to publish in a wider range of journals.

Connections to funding sources. A third critical connection is that between social work researchers and funding sources. Social work researchers have made only very limited efforts to compete for research funds at the national level (Task Force on Social Work Research). Fewer than half of all faculty members teaching in doctoral programs are engaged in funded research (Jenson, Fraser, & Lewis, 1991), and this is the group most likely to have supported projects. Many schools lack mechanisms to receive and distribute grant announcements in a timely fashion. We neither know or are known by the numerous federal and private agencies interested in supporting the kind of studies we can or should be conducting. And when we do apply, we are often daunted by the application process, surprised by the review criteria and outcome, and too disheartened to resubmit. We need to learn the hard-earned lesson our colleagues in other disciplines learned long ago -- the necessity of applying three times before success.

Lack of external support has consequences for the scope of our studies, and the resources we can bring to bear upon them. Further, it has troubling consequences for the support and training of doctoral students. Fewer than half of doctoral faculty are able to employ students on research projects (Jenson et al., 1991), nearly one third of doctoral programs lack any outside grant funding for students (Kronick et al., 1989), and fewer than one third of doctoral students are connected in any way to funded research (Jenson, Fraser, & Lewis, 1991). Our lack of connections to funding sources leave us doing research on a shoe string, and denying our doctoral students both financial resources and critical exposure to the experience of sanctioned, supported, and peer-evaluated research.

COMPETENCIES

Competency. Finally, it is apparent that social work research and training for research require new levels of competency. For nearly 20 years, social work has regarded preparation for research as the "raison d'être" of doctoral programs (Rosen & Stretch, 1978a, page 5; GADE, 1992). And, we have been reminded that preparing the next generation of our profession's leadership requires "the best available content" and clearly conveyed expectations that doctoral students will reach "the highest level of expertise . . . attainable " (Rosen, 1978, page 25). Such expertise is recognized as essential in both the conceptual and the methodological (Aiken, West, Sechrest, Reno, 1990; Proctor & Snowden, 1991) aspects of scholarship.

Yet, few of our doctoral programs would appear to offer the best available content, nor challenge students to the highest levels of expertise. Studies of doctoral programs reveal that few require a research or statistics prerequisite (Jenson, et al. CSWE, 1994); most begin with undergraduate or MSW level statistics; the difficulty and sophistication of research content increase only slightly in successive required social work doctoral courses (Fraser, Jenson, & Lewis, 1991); and teaching for comprehension with modest application dominates research curriculum (Jenson, Fraser, & Lewis, 1991). Advanced statistics skills necessary to conduct sophisticated research such as using linear probability techniques and developing econometric models are taught at levels of cursory knowledge or awareness only (Jenson et al., 1991). And because fewer than one in four doctoral program require a research practicum (Kammerman, Meezan, Glisson, Jenson, & Proctor, 1994), many social work doctorates have one and only one hands-on research experience--the dissertation.

As we might expect, these weaknesses in doctoral training are reflected in the work of doctoral level social work researchers. In the view of major research funding agencies, such as the NIMH, proposals submitted by social work doctorates rarely meet established standards for funding (Kronick, Kamerman, & Glisson, 1989). Indeed, the NIMH viewed it necessary for social work to benefit from developmental centers, to help bring our research designs to a fundable level.

Commenting of the weaknesses in proposals submitted for NIMH supported research development centers, NIMH staff observe that about half of the denials were due to flaws in the Infrastructure Development portion of the applications, and half were due to flaws in the Research Enhancement Proposal, or regular RO-1 type proposal. Over the past year, Dr. Kathleen Ell attended virtually every NIMH proposal review session involving a social work researcher. She reports not a bias against social work among review committees, nor a paradigm incompatibility. Rather, she observed that social work proposals lack focused conceptual frameworks--that is, a clear statement of the driving scientific questions and issues. Our proposals lacked clear, critical reviews of the literature. Our research designs were plagued with fundamental methodological weaknesses. And we failed to offer a rationale for the variables we selected to measure.

Clearly, new levels of competence are required if social work researchers are to address increasingly complex social and interpersonal problems. Social work investigators must be well trained to use existing methods, and to develop new methodologies (Robbins, 1993). "Without the expertise and skills that enhance our own historical contribution and those that enable us to compete or work in tandem with other professions and disciplines, social work will become less competitive in the marketplace of ideas, and the search for solutions to our pressing problems will be compromised" (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, 1992).

Trends and implications. . What can we expect from our profession? What evidence have we for optimism that our climates might become more supportive of research? that our scholars might become more connected to the disciplines and to expert researchers in those disciplines? that our competence might grow?

First, there is evidence that schools of social work across the country have begun to wrestle with the centrality of research to their mission. David Austin (1993) observes that, in response to the NIMH announcement for Social Work Research Development Centers, the "concept of a systematic program of practice-relevant research" has become a major center of attention in schools of social work. Over twenty schools have submitted proposals, and countless others have examined the requirements for such centers. According to Austin, Chair of the Task Force on Social Work Research, "The process of shifting from a model in which research is regarded as the idiosyncratic activity of individual faculty members to a model in which practice-relevant research is a central element in the institutional mission of the professional school of social work has begun" (1993). This momentum in the area of mental health must be maintained, and the patterns of "research collaboration must be extended to other areas of national concern, including other forms of severe and chronic illness, child welfare, substance abuse, and problems of persistent poverty" (Austin, 1993).

Similarly, the profession as a whole has united to support the importance of research. For the very first time, during 1993, five separate social work associations united around a single purpose--that of strengthening social work research. The Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, created with the financial resources of the profession as a whole, has as its mission strengthening the connections between practice and research, the connections between social work researchers and funding agencies, and advancing the

competence of social work researchers. Concurrently, a member-based Society for Social Work Research is developing. And new avenues for publishing and disseminating social work research have been birthed.

The profession evidences also heightened seriousness in the pursuit of training competent researchers. The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education has embarked on an effort to identify model curricula for statistics and research methods courses. These models should "up the ante" in terms of quality and rigor in research training.

And, conferences such as this Ohio State symposium aim toward and provide a forum for disseminating models of improved linkages between doctoral scholarship and the practice of social work (Boettcher, 1993). This forum is important for its recognition of excellence in doctoral scholarship, and for its exchange of ideas about how to advance our profession's pursuit of knowledge development.

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