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Ronald E. Hall

Michigan State University, hallr@msu.edu

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Evidence-based practice as social work 'technology'

Ronald E. Hall
Michigan State University
hallr@msu.edu

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Abstract

Contemporary scholars who are critical of social work insist that its status is one of a semi-profession. Their assumption is contingent primarily upon an assumed lack of rigor and technological expertise. Social Work will be regarded as a legitimate profession if it adopts Evidence Based Practice. It entails the application of a series of scientific research procedures that are dictated by scientific evidence. By adopting EBP critics will be less able to challenge Social Work's professional status.

Keywords: Evidence-Based Practice, Practice, Social work, Profession, Technology

Introduction

Public perceptions of Social work practice which addresses the problems of individuals, groups and communities remains inherently complex. Said public perceptions may yield important information that is pertinent to the profession's viability in a changing racial, ethnic, and cultural environment. Kaufman and Raymond (1996) conclude that public perceptions of Social work and Social workers in general are significant because community sanction is essential to the survival of both (Knight, 2006). Andrews (1987) contends that a favorable public perception is a needed element in sustaining a profession, and the sustaining process should involve continuous marketing of the profession and its services to the general public as well as professional peers (Zugazaga & Surette, 2006). Additionally, according to Roff and Klemmack (1983), perceptions of Social workers can be an indirect measure of the potential support for any manner of social services (Sellers & Smith, 2006). Public perceptions also significantly impact upon individual willingness to seek assistance from Social workers and similar helping professionals (Andersen & Newman, 1973; Von Sydow & Reimer, 1998; Jones & Vela, 2006). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the perceptions of Social work contribute to the ability of the profession to attract qualified students and other prospective personnel to sustain its future (Kaufman & Raymond, 1996; Wilson & Valentine, 2002). The outcome will influence the ability of Social work to remain viable.

Current perceptions of Social work in the United States of America evolved from a history of social services, including child welfare and mental health (Carlton-LaNey, 1999). Modern-day practitioners permeate the ranks of political, educational, industrial, and health care organizations. Furthermore, said practitioners have expanded their client base, extending services to populations such as prisoners, the homeless, and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) patients. Considering their client base, Social work practitioners are perceived as nice people but not very intelligent by professional peers and the lay public they serve. As an occupation contingent upon community sanction, the potency of Social work's public perception necessitates that its affiliates document and inculcate the technological core of what Social work is. The objective of this paper is the introduction of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) as a potentially significant contributor to that core. Orientation to said core will provide the Social work intelligentsia and its professional peers with the specifics from which its credibility and professional status can be substantiated. The paper will illuminate some of the heretofore uncorroborated criticisms that have been attributed to the profession's lack of a technological expertise. Such an exposition is ultimately designed to enhance an understanding of the unique blend of values, ethics and social justice that has enabled Social work to achieve the status of a legitimate profession. The outcome will provide a glimpse of the future where Social work practitioners will permeate every level of the human service community, dedicated to the emergence of an increasingly diverse, clientele consisting of all races.

Semi-Profession

According to Merriam-Webster's (Mish, 1993: 930) dictionary, a profession is distinguished by an occupation requiring specialized knowledge and more often long and intensive academic preparation to conduct. Therefore, rigorous training and the mastery of a specialized knowledge base is compulsory for those wishing to enter a profession. In conjunction with similarly trained others, professionals form organizations that provide for the licensing credentials and a specified code of ethics. Despite the fact that Social work has consistently met all three criteria it is not normally included among most lists of professions.

Traditionally, religion, law, and medicine were regarded as the classic examples of a profession. In addition to satisfying the criteria of a profession those maintaining membership in one of the classic professions took oaths, thereby professing their loyalty to a higher standard of accountability. These rituals of the classic professions satisfied task requirements during less complex and dense population eras. However, as more complex urbanized societies emerged, the definitions of a profession changed significantly. Included were references to power and elitism perpetuated by an exclusive and significant few. Their definitions extended less from the classic tradition and more from personalized, subjective preference. Thus, by the 20th century, occupations that were identified as professions incorporated little more than monetary compensation for a contracted activity. As a result Social Work is viewed as a less prestigious semi-profession.

The perception of Social work being a semi-profession is not irrelevant to various group and political factors (Morelli & Spencer, 2000). Culturally, the assignment of authority has been to a dominant group male and/or female domain resulting in less prestige for occupations that are significantly populated by minorities. Thus, the semi-professional perception of Social work is due partly to the fact that the typical professional is a dominant group member, whereas the typical semi professional is associated with minority group members (Ugorji, 1997). Despite continuing efforts to bring about equality, minorities have lower occupational status relative to the influence and control of dominant groups (Vaz, 1995). As a group, minorities are less educated, less esteemed within the culture, and less likely to occupy positions of authority than are their dominant group counterparts (Kitano, 1997). In patriarchal societies a similar perception of prestige can be constructed on the basis of gender.

Scholars who are critical of Social work insist upon its status as a semi-profession. According to Etzioni (1969), Social work qualifies as a semi-profession because its training is presumed to be less rigorous, and its status is less esteemed, giving its practitioners less right to privileged communication and/or technical expertise. Furthermore, according to some, Social work lacks a technology that would oblige practitioners to be independent of societal control, a control indicative of legitimate "professions." However lacking, Social work cannot be construed as a lay occupation given that it meets at least minimum standards of a legitimate profession. Hence, among critics, "semi-profession" is the most suitable reference for an occupation above that of lay but arguably below that of professional.

The argument for social work as semi-profession is enabled by the authority differential between agency practitioner and administrator. The limited amount of knowledge that the practitioner is presumed to have imposes upon their independence in relation to administrative authority. They are apt to practice more on the basis of credential than technology. When practice operates without technology the administrative relationship is manifested hierarchically. That is, because social work practitioners have less autonomy vis-à-vis technology, they are more amenable to the administrative hierarchy, albeit less so than the lay worker (Hall, 2000).

Semi-professions share a host of common traits. The most obvious is that they aspire to professional status. Despite challenges, semi-professionals view themselves as professionals, as does a significant portion of the Social work population. Their motivation for seeking professional status extends from an effort to avoid the lay alternative. In fact, much like professionals, semi-professionals are more often college educated and fear being grouped with the laborer, secretary, or other non-professional employee. Amidst constant challenges to their status, semi-professionals then make a concerted effort to identify with those who are higher in the occupational hierarchy (Etzioni, 1969).

According to critics, social work agencies are typical of semi-professional organizations. Although such agencies do apply a specific knowledge base they are semi professional to the

extent that their minimally trained workers engage, in some instances, in minimally privileged communication, for example the courts. Conversely, among more legitimate professions, the extent of training and educational rigor facilitates practitioner independence and professional status. In fact, social workers apply knowledge, but the gap between agency practitioner and administrator varies to a greater extent than is true for some of their equally educated cohorts, such as attorneys. For example, the ability of the social worker to authorize the hospitalization of a client is diminished by the authority of professions more specialized and legally sanctioned (Bogolub, 1998). Under such circumstances, the social worker is only indirectly associated with client freedom or hospitalization, although they may in fact be more important in the life of the client than judges or attorneys. In this instance social work status even as semi-profession may suffer a reduction in prestige.

Evidence-Based Practice

The perception of social work as a semi-profession is largely an extension of its lack of technical expertise. In an advanced technological society, occupational expertise, that is a profession, is less forthcoming in the absence of technologically based skill. While social work has maintained some degree of technical expertise, it is perceived universally as less rigorous than that of the so-called classic professions (Cnaan & Parsloe, 1989). That perception is the product of a methodology where performance is less measurable and less amenable to public scrutiny. Said methodology may also be performed in a less amenable setting, necessitating the need for constant evaluation. Subsequently, social workers seek and require community sanction and at times are admonished for what they do when their work offends the public domain. Such actions are less typical of bona fide professionals. That is, the public is not likely to review the work of attorneys or physicians for quality assurance. The public may not necessarily endorse legal or medical decisions, but seldom if ever challenges them on the grounds of expertise. Social workers, because they lack a similar level of perceived expertise, relative to other professionals, encounter public scrutiny in the outcome of unpopular decision making in social work practice (Rosen, Proctor, Morrow-Howell, & Staudt, 1995).

As Systems Theory borrowed from the hard sciences, EBP originated with medical science for application in the social sciences (Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, Rosenberg & Haynes, 1997; Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes & Richardson, 1996). EBP entails a series of scientific research procedures. It is intended for the application of rigorous expertise to arrive at the most effective practice methods based upon objective research findings (Haynes, Devereaux, & Guyatt, 2002). It is a deliberate and reasoned process fashioned to bring about outcomes that are commensurate with evidence, ethics, and achievable changes. Succinctly put, EBP “is the integration of the best research evidence...” (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000: 1). The best research evidence is compiled by relevant and recognized professionals who have the skills and experience to organize unique circumstances and characteristics into a viable strategy. That strategy is intended to serve the desired outcome that is relevant to “individual risks and benefits of potential interventions, and their personal values and expectations” (Sackett, Straus,

Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000: 1). Scientific objectivity will lessen the impact of social work criticisms from otherwise unfamiliar external origins. Commensurate with the prescripts of a profession, the proposed EBP will utilize data from a variety of sources (Haynes, Devereaux, & Guyatt, 2002). The scientific experts who are consulted will incorporate the unique perspectives and skills available to enable the most relevant and productive outcomes of the practice situation. Evidence Based Practice requires the generation of data and consultation with experts to bring about the most informed and effective methods.

Evidence-Based Practice is a de-politicized extension of methods that were previously utilized in helping professions, including Medicine, Nursing, and so forth. As per the de-politicization of practice, EBP is herein suggested as a counterweight to the accusations that social work is a semi-profession. Critics who presume to be objective take issue with social work's emphasis on values which may not be politically popular. The intent of EBP is to assist in the de-politicization of social work criticisms. De-politicization will enable objectivity and the recognition of social work as a legitimate profession distinguishable by its technological expertise. Doing so will accommodate practitioners and the clients they serve, resolving the issue of professional status. Unfortunately, the application of the term "evidence-based" has been popularly used in ways that were unintended. In fact, strategies that are described as evidence-based are a misuse of the term in that the methods or technologies involved are not based upon evidence at all (Gambrill, 2003). Social work practitioners who adhere to EBP must necessarily be scientifically rigorous in their assessment of proposed practice methods. The fact that much of the public has been misled regarding EBP requires its explanation (Straus & McAlister, 2000). This will minimize misuse and enable more appropriate comprehension of the concept.

The evolution of social work toward a more expert technology can be realized via the prescripts of EBP. Evidence-Based Practice is intended to provide a means to validate practice methodology for Social workers who are engaged in the conduct of human services. Evidence-Based Practice is aligned with the most rigorous scientific evidence available from recognized experts in relevant fields of expertise. In the current era, social work practitioners in the United States have been limited in their attempts to serve public interests by the political structures that undermine the viability of their validation as legitimate profession. Evidence-Based Practice seeks to divorce the social work process from the subjective realm and base it instead on research evidence. Workers who chose could apply this authority in reaching client achievement goals. Thus, EBP is composed ideally of methods for which there is consistent, scientific evidence establishing that practitioner involvement be commensurate with desired outcomes.

Application of EBP to Social work Practice

Social work can utilize EBP using the following processes, as occurred in other professions such as medicine and nursing:

1. Initially, EBP will require standardizing information needs relative to the problem, which includes a description of the issue, description of the population, a proposed method and intended outcome. By application of the aforementioned process, social work practice can significantly improve the potential for client compliancy, recovery, and social worker-client rapport. In an era of ubiquitous fiscal conservatism and budget restraints, EBP should be emphasized not only for professional reasons but to increase the confidence levels of both social work practitioners and the public at-large. The eclectic nature of social work practice has inclined not a few practitioners to a reluctance to adhere to established guidelines and standardized procedures. What is more, of those who are reluctant, some may simply be unaware of EBP procedures. For example, the decision to remove a child from the custody of its parents may depend upon any number of practitioner approaches. The use of EBP is an attempt to organize such complex tasks. In doing so it will make use of practice guidelines intended to provide social work practitioners with a means to implement the most recent relative evidence.
2. Assembling an institutional agency for the generation of information will accommodate the aforementioned activities. In the long term, the social work intelligentsia must consider publication of a manual for standardizing the various tasks of the practice environment that will meet the needs of its students, professors, and licensure agents. With the invention of various technologies, including computer software and the internet, social work practice has evolved tremendously from that of the previous generation. Therefore, it becomes critical that social work students, professors, and practitioners be prepared to cultivate a new set of skills in order to take advantage.
3. Social work must improve its use of expert consultation for the objective assessment and organization of needed data to enhance its validity, effectiveness, and potency. Such improvement is commensurate with the ability of social work as a profession to deal with the unexpected which is key to the validation of a legitimate professional technology. In addition, social workers are increasingly being called as expert witnesses to inform decision-making processes involving complex issues and far-reaching policy implications. During such occasions the profession is subject to the scrutiny of judges, attorneys, and public speculation. The ability of the social worker to perform under these circumstances can have a significant impact upon the prestige and validity of the profession as well as resolution of the problem at hand.

4. It is beneficial to organize the results of evidence so that practice decisions will be enhanced. This active process will bring about a merging of the public and professional objectives in the interest of clients, and scientific expertise with desired outcomes. The intent is that social work practitioners will be able to determine whether the evidence is relevant to the task at-hand. The fact is limitations on knowledge cannot exist given that there are no external limitations to what a practitioner can learn. Suffice it to say that members of the profession are bound by little more than personal effort. Subsequently, the creed of the scientific method requires the appropriation and exchange of knowledge to evolve. Social workers who operate under these auspices will enhance their service technology.
5. Last, it is important to constantly measure and assess the effectiveness of social work practice to facilitate present and future treatment outcomes (Sackett et al., 2000, p. 4). That is, the rigorous examination and documentation of information will accommodate the resolution of similar practice tasks for the consistent and continuous expansion of the knowledge base. When practitioners apply a variation in treatment methods to the same problem it will more likely result in animosity from the client and loss of prestige in the mind of the public. The availability of evidence will do much to deter such reactions.

Conclusion

The prevalence of dominant and minority group occupational associations may ultimately impact social work's prestige and its ability to be accorded professional status. In the U.S. minorities may populate social work, in European nations more women may dominate. Historically, social work was perceived as a lay occupation. Such a perception enabled practitioners to approach service with a broad general knowledge base and skills in several disciplines, fields, and so forth. Educational rigor is subjective and from the social work perspective the rigor of EBP enables practitioners to move with minimal difficulty to desired outcomes. Thus, similar to classic professions that are characterized by specialization, EBP is designed to allow consistent application to a multitude of problems from a multitude of perspectives (Petracchi, 1999). This allows the social worker to circumvent potential conflict vis-à-vis values, belief systems, ignorance, and accusations of being a semi-profession. The potential wide range of problems requires practitioners to assume a wide range of roles. They must be prepared to advocate like an attorney, teach like an educator, diagnose like a doctor, and investigate like a researcher. In consideration of client autonomy, the EBP approach prohibits the worker from selecting a methodology without evidence and client input. The EBP approach is most applicable because social work practice necessitates a professional level of competence. This profound aspect of training is an accreditation requirement of all baccalaureate programs that seek to prepare graduates for social work practice (Kasper & Wiegand, 1999).

By literal definition, traditional schools of thought suggest that technological competence means the capacity to execute a particular task (Jones & Alcabes, 1989). This simple definition becomes obsolete when applied in the absence of EBP. Furthermore, EBP applied to social work, enables technological competence because the variations in tasks are made more intelligible commensurate with differing treatment methodologies (O'Neal, 1999). The tasks for a macro practitioner will differ from those that are required of a micro practitioner. Thus, it logically follows that the semi-profession accusations attributed to social work technology are all but impossible to deny unless a single criterion for the evaluation of competence can be specified. The definition of competence, however, should not be assumed to be altered as different tasks are performed. While social work has a less specific technology it cannot be disqualified as a profession for that reason alone. Whereas decision making ability, treatment modality, knowledge base, and so forth are important, none of these as single criterion reign sufficient without the benefits of EBP. However, considered in conjunction they comprise social work's professional technology.

Given the fact that social work is a profession, practitioners are held accountable for their actions. Students in the field who advocate on behalf of a client may meet the normal conditions of competence but not be considered professional because of their student status. When a student graduates, more is involved than the assumption of competence to perform certain tasks. Graduation is a convenient but not always accurate means to establish that adequate knowledge, intelligence, and experience have been accumulated so that the student qualifies to pass through the gate. They are immediately endowed with a set of rights by which they are presumed to have the authority to exercise social work technology. Said authority, in most instances, implies one who is capable of understanding and communicating relevant information, of weighing risks and benefits, and of making complex practice decisions. Such a graduate also has the ability to select appropriate goals and choose the appropriate channel to achieve goals in accordance with some standard of what the profession does if it is grounded in EBP. Thus, by and large, social work is on the brink of gains in public prestige. However, it needs to further clarify and codify its practice methods.

Continuing development of an esoteric nomenclature will be instrumental in that effort. Precise outcomes following practice intervention will prove useful if they can be measured. Such measurement will enable the profession to better defend its reputation. Accordingly, the profession may then take control of who may use the title of "social worker," and under what circumstances it may be used. As a result, the status of social work as a legitimate profession may ultimately reach public perception without dispute from less informed critics.

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