

Positioning Social Work Researchers for Engaged Scholarship to Promote Public Impact

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ABSTRACT The concept of *engaged scholarship* has garnered significant attention across numerous scientific disciplines. Engaged scholarship can be conceptualized as both a method centered on cocreating and applying new knowledge and a movement focused on prioritizing community identification of needs and social problem-solving strategies. In an effort to position social work researchers for engaged scholarship to promote public impact, we provide an overview of the following engaged-scholarship mechanisms: (a) community-based participatory research, (b) participatory action research, (c) practice-based research networks, (d) translational research, (e) transdisciplinary scientific collaborations, (f) systemic evaluation, and (g) developmental evaluation. We address the contextual factors that may influence the extent to which social work researchers can successfully pursue engaged scholarship and conclude by explicating a plausible relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship. Specifically, we apply the diffusion of innovations model and community dissonance theory to conceptually position engaged scholarship as a vehicle for promoting and optimizing public impact scholarship.

KEYWORDS: community research, engaged scholarship, public impact, scholarship, social work research

doi: 10.1086/706266

The concept of *engaged scholarship* has garnered significant attention across numerous scientific disciplines. This attention can be attributed, in part, to institutions of higher education revisiting earlier commitments to engage with and serve the public (Boyer, 1996). Engaged scholarship can be conceptualized as both a method centered on cocreating and applying new knowledge and a movement focused on prioritizing community identification of needs and social problem-solving strategies (Boyer, 1990; Delavega, Lennon-Dearing, Neely-Barnes, Soifer, & Crawford, 2017). In the words of Ernest Boyer (1996), engaged scholarship “means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge . . . the

universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us” (p. 33). Engaged scholars stand, operate, and serve at the nexus of the academy and the community. Such a climate is fertile for accelerating impact.

Social work is especially well suited to deploy a workforce of researchers who foster a special climate through engagement with their communities. Scholars have recently articulated this fit between engaged scholarship and social work (Adams, 2019; Delavega et al., 2017). Delavega and colleagues even proposed engaged scholarship as the signature research methodology for social work. This proposal is warranted on several fronts. First, social work professional values align with the logic undergirding engaged scholarship. Moreover, the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative developed by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (Sherraden et al., 2015) has identified a set of pressing social issues around which social work practitioners, educators, and researchers can unite. These challenges are complex and will require creative and sustained strategies to engage with communities to cocreate and apply new knowledge over time.

Engaged scholarship also has a role in promoting the public impact of social work research. In the context of this special section, we aim to delineate the relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship. As defined by Sliva, Greenfield, Bender, and Freedenthal (2019), public impact scholarship is “characterized by intentional efforts to create social change through the translation and dissemination of research to nonacademic audiences” (para. 7). Certainly, engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship have some conceptual overlap; efforts to distinguish between these two forms of scholarship are warranted and instructive. It also is necessary to note that, as defined here, *public impact scholarship* is not synonymous with *public impact*. Public impact scholarship can be viewed as a methodological antecedent aiming to penetrate the public sphere with the intention of making a real difference in the population of interest—an outcome we could define as public impact.

We begin by casting engaged scholarship on the backdrop of social work as a discipline. We then operationalize engaged scholarship by defining and overviewing a nonexhaustive set of engaged-scholarship mechanisms: (a) community-based participatory research, (b) participatory action research, (c) practice-based research networks, (d) translational research, (e) transdisciplinary scientific collaborations, (f) systemic evaluation, and (g) developmental evaluation. In addition, we address contextual factors that can influence social work researchers’ success in pursuing engaged scholarship. We conclude by explicating a plausible relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship. Specifically, we apply the diffusion of innovations model and community dissonance theory to conceptually position engaged scholarship as a vehicle for promoting and optimizing public impact scholarship.

Social Work Researchers as Engaged Scholars

Engaged scholarship embodies a community-focused and partnership-oriented approach to the research process and is very much analogous to terms commonly found across literatures, including *research–practice partnerships* (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Ovretveit et al., 2014; Tseng, 2017), *researcher–practitioner cooperation* (Wagner, 1997), *practitioner–scientist partnerships* (Spoth & Greenberg, 2005), and sustainability science (Clark & Dickson, 2003; Lang et al., 2012), among others. Social work professional values align with the logic undergirding engaged scholarship. Specifically, as articulated by the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2017), the values of social justice, the worth and dignity of the person, the importance of human relationships, and service are well aligned with the tenets and goals of engaged scholarship. This alignment fosters a natural fit between social work research and engaged scholarship.

As noted earlier, the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative also highlights the need for impactful and sustainable research efforts. For example, consider the Grand Challenge to Reduce Extreme Economic Inequality. Economic inequality is a highly complex social ill that is associated with determinants across the vast micro–macro continuum (Bradshaw, 2007). It seems implausible, if not impossible, for researchers alone to generate and apply the knowledge needed to reduce extreme economic inequality. In fact, much of the challenge associated with a wicked problem such as economic inequality lies in fostering shared understanding of the problem—its definition and causes—in an effort to generate effective, agreeable improvements that yield impact (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Fostering shared understanding is by definition a social and political activity that requires sustained engagement among stakeholders such as researchers, policymakers, service providers, and service recipients.

Community stakeholders invested in the issue of economic inequality bring multiple bodies of expertise to the table that are potentially complemented by the expertise of researchers capable of framing and asking important questions and responding with actionable evidence for reducing inequality. Such joint expertise is more than the sum of its parts, allowing for research questions and answers to translate into shared understanding that drives action guided by informed stakeholders in multiple social locations. Thus, it behooves social work researchers to initiate engagement of their communities to tackle the serious social problems they face and remain open and responsive to community requests for research participation in social problems. Social work researchers using engaged scholarship can thus help reduce the alarming knowing–doing gap that permeates a large number of service-delivery sectors (Brekke, Ell, & Palinkas, 2007; Glasgow & Chambers, 2012).

Mechanisms for Engaged Scholarship

There are several common mechanisms for engaged scholarship: (a) community-based participatory research, (b) participatory action research, (c) practice-based research networks, (d) translational research, (e) transdisciplinary scientific collaborations, (f) systemic evaluation, and (g) developmental evaluation. To an extent, navigating the descriptions of these mechanisms seems like an exercise in semantics. We believe there are notable distinctions across these mechanisms, but there are unifying elements as well. For instance, each engaged-scholarship mechanism we review encourages a human-centered perspective, which demands the active consultation and involvement of stakeholders and service users or end users (Hanington, 2010). The engaged-scholarship mechanisms we summarize also emphasize a systems perspective, whereby researchers acknowledge and tactfully navigate the dynamic contexts in which programs and services are to be developed, evaluated, refined, scaled, and sustained (Midgley, 2000, 2006). In addition, many engaged-scholarship mechanisms align well with key implementation-science tasks, including the cocreation of knowledge, a focus on ongoing and iterative program improvement, and sustaining change (Kainz & Metz, 2019; Metz, Louison, Ward, & Burke, 2018). Ultimately, engaged-scholarship mechanisms are aimed at making a difference. Indeed, the engaged scholar continually asks, “What does my community need?” And, perhaps more importantly, the engaged scholar seeks out community representatives to offer the answers rather than relying on academic expertise alone.

As noted earlier, our review is not exhaustive, and the mechanisms we discuss are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, these seven mechanisms represent approaches to engaged scholarship with which social work researchers ought to be familiar. We do not assert that social work researchers should (or even could) pursue a research agenda that overtly incorporates all of the mechanisms we outline. Instead, social work researchers will likely embed themselves in research teams and cultivate and apply a specific skill set that aligns with one or more of these mechanisms. Alternately, social work researchers may respond to opportunities or challenges as they arise in their communities and apply engaged-scholarship mechanisms accordingly. At the least, we hope this article stirs the imaginations of social work researchers who might consider ways to initiate or bolster their engaged scholarship to make a difference in their communities and promote public impact—a process we unpack in our concluding section.

We offer one more issue for consideration before embarking on the review. The lens through which we reviewed methods was primarily informed by a postpositivist perspective, where scientific inquiry is the pursuit of knowledge gleaned through observation and experience (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson, & O’Jack, 1991). Through a postpositivist lens, each of the engaged methods reviewed here can be seen as a tool for potentially improving, specifying, or enhancing knowledge obtained by

observing and experiencing phenomena in relation with communities. A different review could operate with a critical lens, exploring how historical and social structures and power dynamics in the research space drive what can be known, and by whom, through engaged methods. Indeed, each of the methods we review vary with respect to how power and expertise are acknowledged and who is likely to be empowered and enriched by engagement. From a social work perspective, these issues warrant readers' consideration throughout the review, particularly in light of social work values (e.g., worth and dignity of the person, social justice, importance of human relationships). Although an in-depth, critical treatment of engaged scholarship is beyond the scope of this article, we strongly encourage a critical view as readers approach the content that follows. (For an astute description of critical action research for social work, see DePoy, Hartman, and Haslett, 1999.)

Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has emerged as a potent strategy for overcoming the knowing-doing gap to promote health and equity in communities (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006, 2010). A central feature of CBPR is collaboration, whereby researchers and community partners equitably unite around a focal issue (Israel et al., 2010). In the context of CBPR, researchers acknowledge the complex systems and cultures that influence the focal issue and engage community stakeholders to better address and adapt to local dynamics (Henderson et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

Moreover, rather than approaching the focal issue as the "expert," researchers applying the CBPR approach attempt to shift power dynamics via collective decision-making, bidirectional learning, shared resources, and prioritizing outcomes that benefit the community (Goodman et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Indeed, just as there is no "I" in team, there is no "I" in research. Researchers who use the CBPR approach seek to "balance rigorous research with routine adoption of its conduct in ways that respectively, productively and equally involve local partners" (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009, p. 2633). Researchers who use a CBPR approach also attempt to sustain their efforts by integrating new programs with existing community programs, cultivating local ownership over community change, and fostering community capacity. In addition, researchers approach the research process in a transparent and equalized way, with a focus on building and sustaining long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with community partners (Henderson et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

Participatory Action Research

Rooted in Lewin's (1948) theory of action research, participatory action research (PAR) "synthesizes investigation, education, and action" (Healy, 2001, p. 94). PAR is a systematic approach to seeking knowledge for social action (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008)

that aims to understand and improve the world by creating change (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). PAR is especially concerned with instances of social injustice that arise from hierarchies of power and privilege in macro social structures (Healy, 2001). Researchers using a PAR approach seek to empower participants—particularly oppressed persons—in the research process by raising consciousness, co-creating knowledge, and fostering collective action (Healy, 2001).

Moreover, a PAR approach encourages researchers to cultivate egalitarian relationships with research partners. A key assumption of PAR is that social causes and change are optimally addressed when the power of knowledge generation is returned to the oppressed individuals involved. The inclusion and empowerment of oppressed persons in the research process is thought to produce more accurate and critical reflections of social reality (Selener, 1997). In many ways, PAR overlaps with CBPR, as it often involves having researchers engage with communities to form partnerships aimed at addressing local social issues. Healy (2001) provided an in-depth treatment of the PAR approach, including details that can help social work researchers overtly navigate power dynamics as they engage communities to promote social change.

Practice-Based Research Networks

Historically rooted in primary-care settings (Green & Hickner, 2006; Mold & Peterson, 2005), practice-based research networks (PBRN) are “collaborations of practicing providers who commit to using their work settings as laboratories for practice-based knowledge generation” (McMillen, Lenze, Hawley, & Osborne, 2009, p. 2). By definition, a PBRN must include two or more practice settings.

In terms of shared characteristics, all PBRNs generate data that reflect community-based care as opposed to service delivery in academic centers or research-oriented clinics (McMillen et al., 2009). These data can take the form of electronic client record systems, client surveys, or other forms of qualitative or quantitative data (McMillen et al., 2009). In addition, PBRNs transcend any single research project at any single point in time. That is, PBRNs often engage in a variety of research projects, which take shape over time to meet stakeholder needs (McMillen et al., 2009). PBRNs also represent a partnership between community practitioners and researchers, although academic centers often provide initial investments in PBRNs and house collected data (Tierney et al., 2007). Lastly, practitioner-members of PBRNs develop and vet research ideas despite being closely affiliated with an academic center that provides infrastructure and methodological expertise (McMillen et al., 2009). Thus, PBRNs are community led and driven.

PBRNs can be diverse with respect to formation, purpose, leadership, and membership (McMillen et al., 2009). In terms of disparate formation processes and purpose, a social work researcher might catalyze a PBRN to answer a practice-related

research question. In other cases, a practitioner might seek to form a PBRN to evaluate the implementation and performance of a new treatment modality across several practice settings. In terms of leadership or membership, PBRNs can be led and managed by individual practitioners, agencies, or organizations (McMillen et al., 2009).

Translational Research

Translational research (TR) is another core manifestation of engaged scholarship (Delavega et al., 2017). The National Institutes of Health has framed TR as resulting in the successful adoption of best practices in the community (Rubio et al., 2010). Indeed, a central goal of TR is to “speed the use of findings from our best science into usual-care settings and to build partnership between research and practice constituencies” (Brekke et al., 2007, p. 123). Efforts on this front are warranted given the substantial average time lag between knowledge generation and its actual application to promote positive outcomes in the population (Morris, Wooding, & Grant, 2011).

With roots in the biomedical sciences, TR often refers to the “bench-to-bedside enterprise of harnessing knowledge from basic sciences” to produce new, effective treatment options (Woolf, 2008, p. 211). TR has also been described as the “effective translation of the new knowledge, mechanisms, and techniques generated by advances in basic science research into new approaches for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment” (Fontanarosa & DeAngelis, 2002, p. 1728). Thus, TR centers on efforts to connect basic science and applied science and generally involves the fusion of researchers and program or policy implementers in the community. Brekke and colleagues (2007) have posited that social work researchers are positioned well for TR because of the presence of social work in the human services sector.

Transdisciplinary Scientific Collaboration

Transdisciplinary scientific collaboration (TSC) represents a form of engaged scholarship by which a social work researcher engages with scholars in other disciplines and practitioners and other experts in the practice space to optimize and enrich the conceptualization of social problems or solutions, application of theory and methodology, and interpretation and application of research findings (Rosenfield, 1992; Stokols, 2006). In addition, TSCs can embody the concept of transdisciplinarity, which has been defined as a

reflexive, method-driven scientific principle aiming at the solution or transition of societal problems and concurrently of related scientific problems by differentiating and integrating knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge. (Lang et al., 2012, pp. 26–27)

Lang and colleagues (2012) contended that TSCs must encompass a focus on socially relevant problems; mutual learning processes among researchers across disciplines and actors outside the academy; and the creation of solution-oriented, socially robust knowledge. These features reflect the spirit of engaged scholarship and its focus on making a difference.

To optimize research partnerships across disciplines, social work researchers must be cognizant of the cultural differences that exist within and between disciplines (Reich & Reich, 2006). In this context, transdisciplinary researchers ought to value diversity and apply ongoing self-assessment. Transdisciplinary researchers also must avoid obstructive power dynamics such as informal hierarchies, disciplinary policing, and tokenism (Reich & Reich, 2006).

Systemic Evaluation

Systemic evaluation methods are intended to be useful for learning and improving in the context of complex adaptive systems, such as communities, health care organizations, and social service agencies. Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011) have offered a thorough description of different methods contained under the heading *systemic*. They included methods for describing and analyzing situations, improving situations, and managing knowledge and learning from situations. What unifies the methods is a systemic framework that (a) attends to the interrelated nature of system elements and levels, (b) examines the multiple and sometimes divergent perspectives operating within systems, and (c) explores the application of boundaries in evaluation practice. These three elements of a systemic framework require engaged scholarship by definition, as stakeholder participation is essential for revealing interrelationships, multiple perspectives, and boundaries.

Consider the evaluation of an intervention designed to reduce education inequality by improving student learning and performance in a high-poverty, high-minority public school. The primary intervention in this case would be professional development for teachers, which is intended to improve classroom instruction and subsequent student learning. A traditional evaluation could justifiably focus on a change model defined by the relations among participation in professional development, changes in instructional practice, and related improvements in student performance. The change model reflects a boundary choice by the evaluator, who has decided what is inside the boundary (i.e., professional development, instructional practice, student learning) and what is not.

By contrast, a systemic evaluation method encourages engagement among evaluators and stakeholders to understand how broader elements of a system—federal and district education policy, faculty collective efficacy, family support for learning, community beliefs about education success—are interrelated with classroom instruction and student learning (Kainz, Lippold, Sabatine, & Datus, 2018). A systemic evaluation team would incorporate multiple viewpoints expressed by key

stakeholders (e.g., researchers, teachers, parents, and students) and allow those viewpoints to expose and expand the boundaries of the evaluation to foster awareness of the systemic nature of education inequality.

Developmental Evaluation

Like systemic evaluation, developmental evaluation uses systems thinking and expands that thinking with an explicit focus on principles from complexity science (Patton, 2011). Complexity science indicates that evaluation of interventions in complex adaptive systems can be challenging because causal relations are not simple: Phenomena in complex adaptive systems contain nonlinearities, feedback loops, hidden causes, and unintended consequences. These factors produce uncertainty in the evaluation space and limit evaluators' capacity to control the environment and reliably predict outcomes.

Developmental evaluation responds to uncertainty by creating a process for developing innovations and adapting based on collaborative review of evidence by stakeholders and researchers. As is the case with systemic evaluation, by definition developmental evaluation is a mechanism of engaged scholarship because of the essential role stakeholders play in conducting the evaluation. Within the developmental evaluation approach, the evaluator is part of an innovation team collaborating on the design and implementation of the evaluations, supporting innovation by asking evaluative questions, and generating methods for providing evidence that supports learning and adaptation (Patton, 2011).

An Integration

Figure 1 illustrates how social work researchers can position themselves at the nexus of these engaged-scholarship mechanisms. Notice that the arrows between the social work researcher and other partners or research targets are bidirectional. This is intended to indicate that relationships are reciprocal and dynamic. As a reminder, the list of mechanisms is not exhaustive, and the mechanisms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a social work researcher might engage with program implementers in a community organization to address a specific social cause in partnership with researchers in other disciplines. This example aggregates several of the engaged-scholarship mechanisms reviewed.

Facilitating Engaged Scholarship: Contextual Challenges and Opportunities

Figure 1 also displays a contextual band placed around the social work researcher and each engaged-scholarship mechanism summarized in our review. This is intended to highlight the larger context in which engaged scholarship takes place, which can influence researchers' efforts. We highlight several specific contextual challenges and opportunities with respect to the facilitation of engaged scholarship among social work researchers.

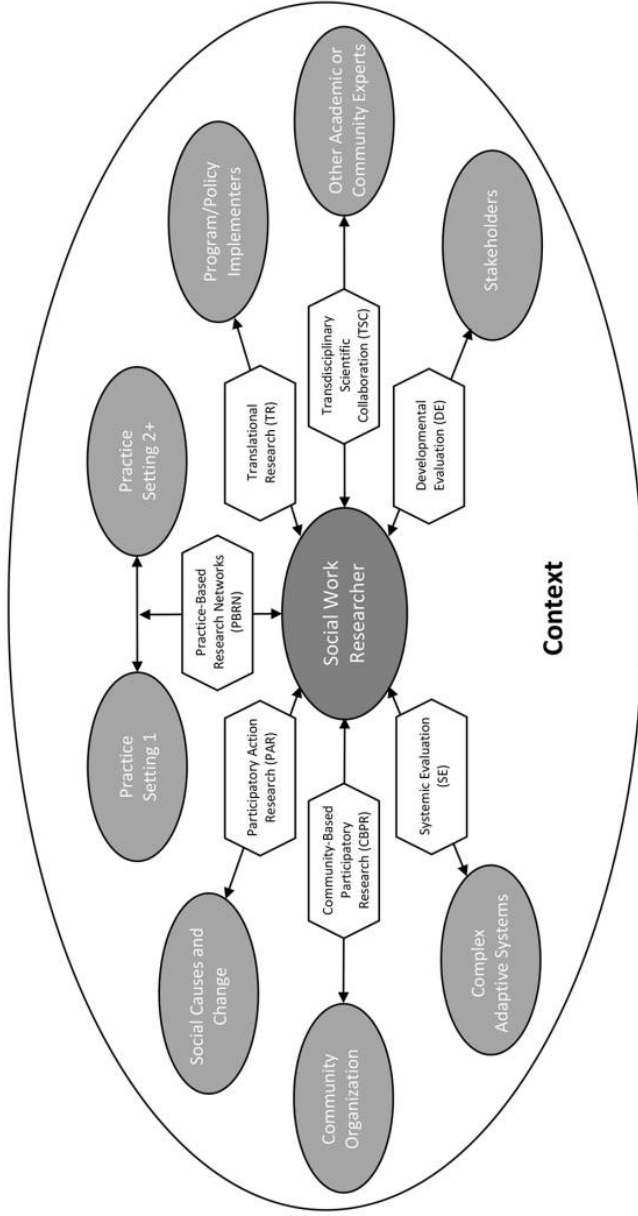


Figure 1. Mechanisms for engaged scholarship in social work research. Bidirectional arrows indicate that relationships are reciprocal and dynamic.

Community culture, attitudes, and experiences. The onus of engaged scholarship is not solely on the social work researcher. For engaged scholarship to take place, the contexts in which research is conducted must be amenable to the scientific process. Thus, organizations, agencies, and practice settings should strive to foster a “research-friendly” culture (Wade & Neuman, 2007), though that may be easier said than done in some cases. Moreover, social work researchers should diligently attend to any distrust among community stakeholders, and sincere effort should be taken to develop strong, genuine, long-lasting relationships within the community. This might require developing a framework for understanding when and how to make agreements and compromises that optimize the relations between research integrity and positive community relationships. Engaged scholarship methods should ultimately support the social viability and perceived legitimacy of the research process and findings.

In practice, the application of engaged scholarship methods might not adhere to the theory and ideals that undergird them. That is, engaged scholarship methods might, for a variety of reasons, deviate from their intended forms and functions. Ongoing efforts should be undertaken to understand why, when, and how such deviations occur. As a result of incongruities between theory and application, some communities may not benefit demonstrably from engaged scholarship; even worse, some communities might be harmed by it. Those who seek to engage their communities in the knowledge-creation process should consider and honor the experiences communities have with research.

Promotion and tenure protocols. Because productive community engagement may take years to foster, junior faculty might be discouraged from participating in engaged work that seems less likely to yield the number of publications and funding opportunities required for a successful promotion or tenure package. Faculty, faculty mentors, and schools of social work can combat this phenomenon by using published recommendations for enhancing the likelihood that engaged scholarship will indeed be *scholarship* that is *engaged* and allow for promotion and tenure. Specifically, faculty and faculty mentors can use a framework for assessing the quality of engaged scholarship (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005) to guide junior faculty development and assess progress toward tenure. Deans and faculty mentors can review and modify the tenure and promotion policies in their schools to ensure that high-quality engaged scholarship gets appropriate consideration during the tenure review (Stokols, Misra, Moser, Hall, & Taylor, 2008).

Funding and resources. We have observed no exclusion of engaged scholarship from federal or foundation funding. Rather, we recognize that several funders with national reach endorse, expand, and fund engaged methods. The William T. Grant Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Institute of Education Sciences, and the National Institutes of Health provide funding and guidance to support researcher–practitioner partnerships, a primary engine for engaged scholarship. However, in many instances the duration of funding does not support long-term engagement,

nor is there sufficient support for the early years of partnership development when problems are framed and explored before large-scale research is conducted. New sources of funding that support sufficient time for engagement, problem framing, early incremental testing, and sustained knowledge management could increase the incidence, quality, and impact of engaged scholarship.

Relationship Between Engaged Scholarship and Public Impact Scholarship

As we noted earlier, a central thrust of this article is to articulate a plausible relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship. Notably, we do not view engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship as equivalent, and engaged scholarship does not always translate into public impact scholarship. That is, the academic–community cocreation of knowledge does not guarantee that knowledge will be translated and disseminated via public channels. In addition, public impact scholarship can take the form of publicly disseminated knowledge that was not generated using engaged scholarship approaches (e.g., secondary data analysis conducted by academic researchers). These are important conceptual distinctions between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship.

Although distinctions are apparent, there is a powerful synergy between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship. Recall that public impact scholarship, as defined in this special section, reflects “intentional efforts to create social change through the translation and dissemination of research to nonacademic audiences” (Sliva et al., 2019, para. 7). It is our primary contention that efforts to yield influential public impact scholarship are strengthened when the knowledge being translated and disseminated is also *generated* via public channels—an approach to research we have defined in this article as engaged scholarship. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual distinctions and overlap between engaged scholarship and public

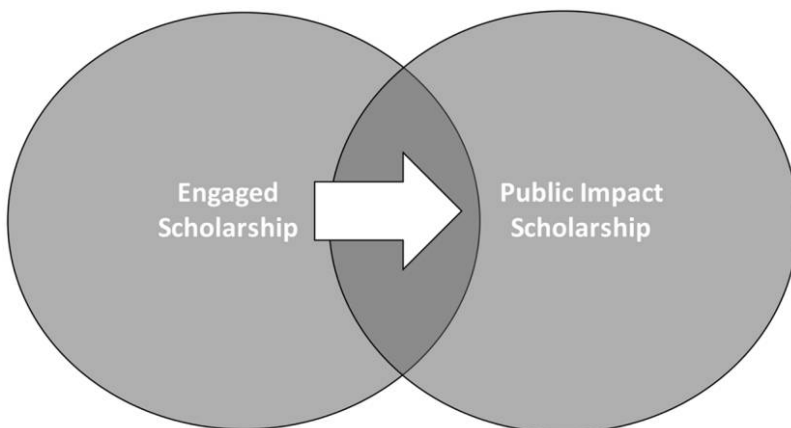


Figure 2. Relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship.

impact as we have articulated them; we primarily portray engaged scholarship as a vehicle for promoting and optimizing public impact scholarship. We now apply two perspectives—the *diffusion of innovations model* and *community dissonance theory*—to explicate this plausible relationship between engaged scholarship and public impact scholarship.

Diffusion of Innovations Model

Rogers (2002) defines diffusion as “the process through which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p. 990). The *diffusion of innovations model* highlights the features of an innovation that increase the probability of the innovation being diffused throughout the community of its intended adopters (Rogers, 1995). Specifically, the framework articulates the role of five innovation features: (a) *relative advantage*, or the extent to which an innovation is perceived as superior to the approach it supersedes; (b) *compatibility*, or the extent to which an innovation is viewed as congruent with the values, experiences, and needs of potential adopters; (c) *complexity*, or the extent to which an innovation is perceived as complex and difficult to understand or use; (d) *trialability*, or the extent to which an innovation can be piloted; and (e) *observability*, or the extent to which the results of an innovation are observable to others (Rogers, 1995, 2002). Evidence suggests that innovations will be adopted more rapidly when they are perceived as having higher levels of relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and observability, and lower levels of complexity (Rogers, 1995, 2002).

Using the diffusion of innovations model, we can conceptualize the products of research as the innovations for diffusion, often with the goal of achieving public impact. In this context, engaged scholarship can be viewed as a strategy for cultivating the features that promote the adoption of innovations. Consider how cocreating new knowledge and innovations with community partners—often our intended adopters—can facilitate partners’ ability to evaluate the relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability of the research innovation. Indeed, community members involved in research efforts often provide the very sites in which research innovations are piloted and evaluated (i.e., trialability), allowing for a direct observation of the innovation’s utility (i.e., observability). Beyond facilitating the evaluation of innovation features, engaged scholarship provides opportunities for community partners to actually influence and shape the features of innovations. For instance, community members might engage in the research process to help create and evaluate an intervention that has probable advantages relative to treatment as usual (i.e., relative advantage). Community members actively engaging in the research process can also work to ensure that proposed solutions to community challenges are compatible with community values (i.e., compatibility) and sufficiently user-friendly (i.e., complexity). Thus, engaged scholarship might optimize

the rate at which research innovations are adopted (i.e., public impact) by including intended adopters as co-innovators in the research process from the outset.

Researchers and communities may possess disparate assumptions and biases with respect to who co-innovators and intended adopters are, or ought to be. From a social work perspective, it would be advisable to critically evaluate and address the power dynamics that can emerge in these contexts. Also warranted are efforts to promote inclusivity and empower community voice when defining “expertise” and seeking local experts or end users to evaluate the features of innovations.

The diffusion of innovations model also emphasizes the following five adopter categories, marked by differences in how early or late one adopts an innovation: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 1995). Innovators and early adopters are among the first to adopt an innovation, positioning them as opinion leaders in their social systems (Rogers, 2002). Engaged scholarship can be viewed as a process of including community innovators or early adopters as partners in knowledge cocreation, which could increase the probability that research innovations are propagated among their community peers (i.e., public impact). Indeed, potential adopters often look to early adopters and innovators for advice and information about innovations (Rogers, 2002). So, as engaged scholars cocreate new knowledge with community partners, they also harbor champions within the very communities in which they hope research innovations will be adopted and implemented.

Rogers (2002) also noted that “mass media channels are more effective in creating initial knowledge of innovations, whereas interpersonal channels are more effective in . . . influencing the decision to adopt or reject a new idea” (p. 990). Consequently, engaged scholarship serves as a method for building interpersonal channels with community partners to diffuse an innovation, rather than relying on “mass media” channels alone. Moreover, most individuals “evaluate an innovation, not on the basis of scientific research by experts, but through the subjective evaluation of near-peers who have already adopted the innovation” (Rogers, 2002, p. 990). Thus, it might be crucial to include community partners in research dissemination communication efforts if meaningful, timely adoption of new innovations is desired. That is, in addition to cocreating new knowledge with community partners, engaged scholars can provide opportunities for community partners to cocreate the products that result from the research process, such as reports, policy briefs, publications, social media posts, or other content summaries (e.g., Bowen, Jensen, & Williams, 2017).

Community Dissonance Theory

Community dissonance theory provides another perspective related to the uptake of research in the public sphere. Often applied to policymaking, community dissonance theory posits that research is often underutilized because “researchers and policymakers come from two different worlds” (Bogenschneider, Corbett, & Parrott,

2019, p. 129). The most recent articulation of community dissonance theory metaphorically frames the research and public communities as two separate archipelagoes, or island chains (Bogenschneider et al., 2019). The two island chains can be close in physical proximity, but deep waters can discourage travel to foreign shores. Moreover, island inhabitants swim daily in their secluded waters, resulting in cultural pockets that can inhibit interisland communication, understanding, and collaboration.

It is our belief that engaged scholarship harmonizes the research and public worlds, or “island chains,” with implications for the uptake of research innovations (i.e., public impact). Consider how the formation of partnerships between researchers and community members can lead to relationships of trust, respect, and mutual understanding. By engaging in the research process together, researchers and community members find new ways of communicating to establish common purpose. Indeed, referring back to the words of Ernest Boyer (1996), engaged scholarship can help create a climate in which the academic and public communities “communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge . . . the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us” (p. 33). This dynamic process of relationship development could yield fertile ground for the adoption of research innovations and eventual public impact. Indeed, rather than working alone in academic spaces and attempting to penetrate the public sphere from the outside, engaged scholarship allows researchers to form meaningful and equitable relationships with members of the community to cocreate and propagate change within the public sphere.

Conclusion

We echo the sentiment of Delavega and colleagues (2017) that “schools of social work are uniquely positioned to contribute to the engaged scholarship movement while simultaneously furthering the empowerment of oppressed people and social change” (p. 573), and that “engaged scholarship should be considered the signature research methodology of social work” (p. 573). In this spirit, we have introduced an integrative mapping of engaged-scholarship mechanisms in relation to social work researchers. We have also detailed some contextual challenges and opportunities with respect to the successful pursuit of engaged social work scholarship. Together, the diffusion of innovations model and community dissonance theory help describe how public impact scholarship is associated with engaged scholarship. To achieve impact, engaged scholarship can be enacted as both a method and a movement that allows for stakeholder roles in conceptualizing, designing, making sense of, and translating research evidence. We are hopeful that this article will captivate the imagination and fuel the motivation of social work researchers as they consider ways to pursue engaged scholarship to promote public impact. We are also hopeful that this article will guide social work educators and administrators in their efforts

to cultivate an academic climate in which engaged scholarship is prioritized and incentivized.

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Acknowledgments

We thank Gary Bowen, dean of the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for his encouragement and support as we developed this article. We also thank our many inspiring colleagues in the School of Social Work and across campus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who make a difference in their communities every day as engaged scholars.

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Manuscript submitted: March 26, 2019

Revision submitted: June 1, 2019

Accepted: June 14, 2019

Electronically published: October 24, 2019