Enhancing the Science of Social Work and Expanding Social Work Research in Transitional Countries

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Abstract

This article compares the status of social work as ascience within American and European contexts and examines methods of increasing the visibility of social work as a science in transitional countries. Focusing on Georgia, the former Soviet Union Country where social work is a newly established discipline and the Georgia doctoral program at Ilia State University, we highlight the needs and priorities for social work doctoral education and its influence on development of the profession and science of social work.In addition, social work research characteristics are reviewed, prioritizing the most relevanttypes of research to build models for bridging the science and service communities that directly affect service provision across different social work sectors. Strategies for developing social work research scholarship and expanding the mission of social work within professional organizations to include evidenced-based translational research are provided.

Keywords: Science of Social Work, Social Work Research, Transitional Countries, Doctoral Education in Social Work

Introduction

Social work is made up largely of master's level practitioners who, as a group, do not have the research sophistication that is found among doctoral students or graduates from other fields (Witkin, 1995). The strength of the social work profession depends on its empirically derived knowledge base as it informs its practice and empowers practitioners through research. Despite its venerable history, social work still struggles with its professional identity, remaining sensitive to the allegation thatit lacks a unique subject matter or methodology, which creates a void in creating evidence based practices.

The social work profession is made up of knowledge, values and skills, but also includes science (Fong, 2012). Although frequently overlooked, science is critical in legitimizing social work both as a discipline and pedagogy. Highlighting science within research will create the conceptual context fromwhich solid evidenced based social work educational programs can be designed and delivered. It is critical for social work education to provide doctoral studentsintransitional countries with the research knowledge of science, particularly for doctoral students as they transition to their new roles asocial work educators, scholars and social scientists. Social work as an applied social science should beprioritized and applied research shouldhighlightthe work done by social work scholars. Thus, schools of social work in research university settings play a critical role in developing a science of social work (Reid, 2011), which are nonexistent in transitional countries.

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Social Work as an Integrative Scientific DisciplineinTransitional Countries

Transitional countries are termed as such due to their transitional nature, typically during recovery from an extended conflict or war. The social work profession is a newly emerging discipline in Georgia, the former Soviet Union country which developed as a response to the severe socio-economic crisis following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Originating in 2006, bachelors, masters and doctoral programs were established in Georgia to prepare professionals in social work. However, there is a clear line of demarcation associated with the degree attained; bachelor's and master's degrees prepare social workers to be practitioners while social work doctoral education prepares social work professionals to teach at higher level institutions. Despite the doctoral focus on the instruction of educators, the social work profession is significantly challenged within European academia and is not seen as a science or research discipline (Decker, Constantine Brown, & Tapia, 2016).

Georgia, similar to the United States, believes social work education and practice must include a solid foundation of science, core skills and social justice. Brekke (2012, 2013) defines the framework of the science of social work with (a) core constructs (biopsychosocial, person-in-environment and service systems for change); (b) core domains (1) to understand marginalization, disenfranchisement, the individual and social factors in disease and individual and social factors supporting health and 2) to foster change, empowerment, inclusion, reducing disease, and increasing health); and (c) aesthetic characteristics (complexity, synthesis and pluralism). Brekke (2012) asserts evidence based practice (EBP) is the area where social work has an explicit relationship with science. In particular, EBP provides science informed practice and includes development and implementation of evidence based or evidence supported practice interventions. Thus, EBP can be seen as a central feature for a scientific, accountable, informed and ethical approach to social work practice (Brekke, 2012).While social work education has historically been grounded in professional practice, reconsideration of social work as a science has recently been urged (Fong, 2012). This dilemma is present within domestic and international social work. American and European colleagues have initiated discourseabout increasing social work's visibility as a scientific discipline and making a more demonstrative contribution to expanding the scientific knowledge base in social and human services (Anastas, 2014; Brekke 2012, 2013; Longhofer &Floersch, 2012; Shaw, 2014; Sommerfeld, 2014).

The gap between science and practice has long been noted in the literature (Backer et al, 1995; Clancy & Cronin, 2005; Morrissey et al, 1997). Brekke, Ell and Palinkas (2007) describe numerousAmerican reports showing a 20-year gap between knowledge generated from the best clinical research and utilization of that knowledge in health and mental health sectors.This division between research informed practice and practice informed researchprovides an impetus for practitioners and researchers to collaborate in establishing research priorities, developing appropriate methodologies and producing useful and relevant research findings (Plath, 2006). Although increased practitioner/researcher alliances have been observed in both Britain and the United States (Cheetham, 1997; Mullen, 2002; Webb, 2002), there is considerable room for improvement. One way to minimize the gap between research and practice is to develop a "translational" science that will bridge findings from exceptionalevidence basedresearch into direct care settings, while building partnerships between research and practice constituencies (Brekke, Ell, & Palinkas, 2007).

One challenge to the integration of research into practice concerns the congruence between research and social work values. In this context, Marsh (2012) argues that it is relevant to determinewhether a particular study has markers consistent with social work'sprofessional purpose and ethical code, or whether it is derived knowledge from psychology, psychiatry, public health, sociology or other related fields. Analyses that considerwhether research is consistent with the core constructs, values and fundamental purposes of social work are critically important to advancing the scientific base of social work practice and establishing more clearly the identity of the profession (Marsh, 2012). Guerrero (2014) asserts that the situational context offers more opportunities than challenges for social work to become a scientific enterprise, noting that social work is well situated to lead conceptual and methodological discussions of client-centered and community based approaches among vulnerable populations.

Social workseeks to resolve real life challenges, often in collaboration with other disciplines. Social work, similar to sociology, psychiatry, public health, and psychology is an applied integrative science, not a natural or core science that engages in the development of knowledge for its own sake (Anastas, 2014). In contrast to the core or natural scientific disciplines (such as biology or chemistry), the integrative scientific disciplines seek to push disciplinary boundaries for solving "problems in living" (Brekke, 2013, p. 522). They are defined by their explicit focus on the application of disciplinary knowledge in integrative ways.

Thus, their knowledge is always applied and technological (Brekke, 2013).According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), social work is both interdisciplinary (several disciplines working jointly from their discipline-specific bases to integrate, combine, or synthesize perspectives, concepts, and/or theories to address a common problem) and transdisciplinary (a collaboration between several academic disciplines and practitioners in professional fields outside academe to address a complex real-world problem). Social work as an integrative applied discipline provides new applications of existing theories (from social sciences and humanities) to problems in life and develops new social work integrative theories, "indigenous knowledges" (IFSW, 2014) and models and guides in solving critical social work problems, which can be replicated.

Prior to 2005, social service providers in Georgia were trained primarily in social psychology. Reflecting collective inclinations, Brogden (2010) asserted "Social work has little tradition as an academic or professional path in most former Soviet countries, with Georgia as no exception" (para. 1). It was not until 2006 that social work curriculum was available at the University level and the establishment of social work as a recognized profession occurred, with sparse literature reflective of the recent introduction of professional social work in Georgia. Thus, Georgia is a fertile climate for integrative social work expansion.

There are additional definitions of social work that clarify the uniqueness of the discipline. Sommerfeld (2014) defines social work as an "action science," meaning that it addresses the real life problems of social work practice while supporting transdisciplinary collaboration. Transdisciplinary collaborationrefers to building a consolidated knowledge base of social work where the main challenge consists of integrating multidisciplinary knowledge across professional boundaries. The action science approach goes beyond evidence-based practice. It does not evolve from adding and meta-analyzing empirical data; rather, thatit composes specific theories of action called "technological knowledge"comprising of multidisciplinary knowledge(Sommerfeld, 2014). The aim of transdisciplinary action science of social work is to enable the profession and professional practitioners to make responsible and informed choices that become a solid foundation for legitimacy of professional social work.

With an intent to legitimize scientific elements of the profession, a critical task is to distinguish social work from other integrative scientific disciplines. Social work is the only helping profession that explicitly promotes social change and social justice (Payne, 2006). Accordingly, social work has three functions: (1) therapeutic, which may promote change on an individual basis; (2) problem solving in human relationships, promoting interpersonal and social "harmony" and (3) promoting social development and/or social change (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009, p.2).Although social justice is a fundamental component of the discipline (IFSW, 2014), integrating social justice into micro, mezzo and macro practice and research is an ongoing challenge for social workers.

Social injustice is profoundly reflected in Georgia's history. Georgia has been heavily influenced by social and political contention, providing the foundation for current social work perspectives. Striking political, economic and social transition in Georgia marked the past two decades of the 20th century in response to the end of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990-1991 resulted in Georgia (formerly a Republic of the Soviet Union) becoming an independent country, but the population's expectations of democratic development, prosperity and inclusion into global processes have not occurred (Bilefsky, 2008). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been undergoing a complete societal transformation when the political regime transitioned from totalitarianism to democracy. The shift to democracy came with great social unrest during the early part of the 21st century. In September 2005, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili fired the police in Tbilisi due to police corruption (Block & Siegal, 2005), which put the military in charge of policing until early 2006. President Saakashvili attempted to revamp the police department by hiring and training new officers, but on November 8, 2007 civilians clashed with police during a protest over lack of governmental transparency. The President responded by declaring a state of emergency and shutting down the central television station in order to limit information and the free flow of ideas to the larger population.

Social unrest existed not only within Georgia, but also between Georgia and surrounding countries. In April 2008, Georgia accused Russia of shooting down an unmanned drone over Abkhazia; Russia denied the claim. However, on August 8, 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, which resulted in 45,000 people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia being displaced as refugees (UNHCR, 2009). An independent international fact-finding mission (Tagliavini, 2009) found that the 2008 conflict, or 5-day war, was caused by Georgia's illegal attack on Tskhinvali (South Ossetian's capital city). Peace, civil and political rights continued to elude the developing democracy of Georgia.

The Characteristics of Social Work Research

Formation of the major social work research lobbying organizations, including funding from the largest research and academic organizations and their institutional investments played a key role in improving the scope and quality of social work research capacity and infrastructure in many social work programs in the United States and in Europe. The development of these organizations paves a pathway to clarify the mission of social work, improve the quality of education and enhance the relationship between research and practice. As a result, science can be more effectively integrated into social work practice.

Social work's commitment to rigorous research is the major indicator for defining social work as a science. According to boththe Action Network for Social Work Education and Research (ANSWER) and theNational Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2015):Social work research benefits consumers, practitioners, policy-makers, educators, and the general public through the examination of societal issues such as health care, substance abuse, and community violence; family issues, including child welfare and aging; well-being and resiliency; and the strengths and needs of underserved populations. Social work research identifies strategies and solutions that enhance individual, family and community well-being by exploring the social, behavioral, and environmental connections to health and mental health issues, and examines the inter-relationships among individuals, families, neighborhoods, and social institutions by conducting research in schools, communities, health care facilities, and human service agencies (pg.1).

Thus, social work research provides empirical support for best practice approaches to improve service delivery and public policies (NASW, 2015). Questions remain regarding social worker's preparedness for the rigor of academic research. In 2009, at the 13th Annual Meeting of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), the quality and quantity of social work wascriticized. Some scholars asserted that "social work students, faculty, and the intellectual leaders of the profession (that is, editors, reviewers, and deans) are ill-prepared for the intellectual rigors of professional scholarship" (Howard, 2009, p 4). While there are indications of growth in the quantity and quality of social work research, serious systemic issues limit the production, utilization, and utility of social work research (Howard, 2010).

Social work leaders have long debated the particular patterns of how social work researchers pursue scientific inquiry (Guerrero, 2013). The general concern was theextent to which social work has adopted a methodological rather than substantive approach to conducting research (BrunswickHeineman, 1981). According to Tripodi andPotocky-Tripodi (2005), social work research is defined as the use of social research methods (e.g., qualitative research, participatory research, ethnographic field studies, case studies, needs assessments, program evaluations, single-subject designs, participant and nonparticipant observation, secondary data analyses, experiments, quasi experiments, surveys, etc.) for producing and disseminating knowledge (hypothetical, qualitative-descriptive, quantitative descriptive, associational or correlational, causal) that is pertinent to policies and practices that affect and/or are implemented by social work organizations, practitioners, administrators, and educators. The research methods employed depend on the level of knowledge sought, financial and ethical considerations, the sociopolitical environment, and expertise in the use of research methods (Tripodi& Potocky-Tripodi, 2005).

The social work profession has unique ethical values that emphasizes human rights and human dignity, a commitment to serving marginalized and oppressed people, and a mission to foster a more just society (NASW, 2008; Witkin, 1995). This ethical context has the potential to augment how other scholars and professionals value social work research. In comparison with other helping professions, social work embraces a very distinctive mission: to oppose the roots and effects of social oppression. Thus, social work research is considered anti-oppressive research and it should be assessed from an anti-oppressive social work perspective (Strier, 2007).Strier (2007) argues that in order to match the liberating mission of the profession, social work research should defy the dominant traditions of social science research. This poses a very real concern: Are critics of social work research questioning the methods or scientific rigor or are they not aligned with social work's anti-oppressive ethical perspective?

DePoy, Hartman and Haslet (1999) suggest a critical action research model as a framework for social work inquiry that is consistent with the mission, values, and aims of the profession. The philosophical foundations of this model are purposive, inclusive, empowering, and action oriented. Moreover, in concert with the contemporary trends for accountability and evidence-based practice, action orientation using this model is well informed by sound and participatory inquiry. This model provides bridges between the university and the community and between research and practice.

Although implementing such a model is a complex process, the critical action model provides systematic guidance through which multiple groups can assume a critical approach to knowledge that informs the development and implementation of social and human services. Action research can use action processes from either experimental and naturalistic traditions or an integration of the two. However, consistent with its principles, all research occurs within its natural context, and it relies on strategies that characteristically are interpretive in nature (DePoy, Hartman & Haslet, 1999).

Doctoral Education in Georgia

To address the needs of Georgia's distressed urban and rural communities, a graduate level social work program was developed in Georgia at Tbilisi State University. In keeping with recommendations for models of social work education (Asamoah, Healy, & Mayadas, 1997), a working group of six faculty decided that the mission of the new program would be to prepare advanced professional practitioners to address the needs of the Georgia regions and to enhance social services through a strengths-based community-oriented individual, children and family practice model, while promoting social justice with special sensitivity to the multinational populations within Georgia.. The Master of Social Work (MSW) Program admitted their first class of twenty-seven full-time students in March of 2007.

The implementation of the MSW program did not go smoothly. Georgia's governmental systems are made up of ministries and the public university systems are governed by the Ministry of Education. The primary role of the Ministry of Education is to develop policies related to the most pressing educational needs, with a larger goal to provide stability and growth that leads to the betterment of all. However, due to the corruption in Georgia at all levels of government, key players within ministries can, and do, change overnight. These changes, in turn, can impact key university personnel (i.e., Rector and Deans) and policies related to existing departments and program development.

Due to various political machinations, Tbilisi State University's MSW program was moved to Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia in July 2007. Along with this geographical shift, field was added to the social work pedagogy. The new curriculum required students to perform 16 hours per week of field placement (internship) for their first year and 20 hours per week for their second year in addition to academic courses.

Curriculum changes have initiated a necessary reconstruction in the perception of social work in Georgia. In order to successfully establish social work as a scientific discipline in the former Soviet Countries, it is critical to prioritize doctoral education and promote social work research. Furthermore, it is important to develop and sustain sound Ph.D. programs to highlight the importance of academic research and academic rigor for doctoral education in social work in a context where social work is historically not valued as a science.

Discussion

Georgia's post USSR transition and the challenges faced by Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University illustrate that social work, a potentially vital element to healing a wounded country, is an invisible discipline attempting to establish itself as a credible science in rural Georgia. The mission of the graduate programs to prepare advanced professional practitioners to address the needs of the Georgia regions, enhance social services through a strengths-based community-oriented model while promoting social justice is a charge that would only aid in the reconstruction of a transitional country. This lens provides information regarding fundamental changes in social work pedagogy. These changes are likely to professionalize and advance the discipline domestically and internationally. Social work needs to make a greater investment in producing scientific knowledge to enable community change (Coulton, 2005). Strategies include: social work research agendas with rigorous research designs, drawing on matching, time series, and other principals of experimentation; the use of multilevel statistical analyses to examine community influences; spatial statistics can be incorporated into community intervention studies; engage systematic and comparable methods of documenting community interventions and boundaries; social work should invest in econometrics as well as psychometrics; and social workers can employ more complicated measurement procedures with social work research.

Sound doctoral education in social work can supportlong-term social work research capacity. Social work doctoral training should give opportunities for students to identify and study meaningful topics and social problems. Moreover, doctoral education is the context for acquiring advanced methodological and analytical skills necessary to participate in knowledge development activities. Doctoral students need to become scholars within the academy; they should be required to take courses that make social work distinctive in the Ph.D. program, such as Social Justice and Human Behavior in the Social Environment (Fong, 2013).

The science of social work should emphasize intersectionality and a transdisciplinary approach for faculty teaching courses, for doctoral students learning knowledge, and for researchers conducting studies. This approach expands the scope of learning and mitigates the dichotomy between basic and applied research (Fong, 2013). In order to support this framework, doctoral education needs multiple mentors from different disciplines to understand and use a transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach, and should incorporate team-taught courses presenting multidisciplinary framework, bringing together expertise from different social sciences/disciplines, e.g. psychology, public health, mental health, social policy (Fong, 2012).

Finally, research that is practice informed maintains congruence with the ethics and values of the profession. Proctor (2003) proposes intervention research as the most relevant for social workers. With transitional countries such as Georgia, research topics of this type abound. Research about practice, its challenges, its priorities, and its participants has the potential to inform intervention development and guide the application of existing interventions to new practice contexts. Thus, research can support increased understanding regarding social problems, problem severity, duration, variability over time, costs, and consequences for social and interpersonal functioning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the comprehensive content of social work doctoral curriculum, there are several tasks to be undertaken for establishing social work as a science in Georgia and otherpost-communist countries.Similar to the United States, social work is not regarded as a science consistently within the field, impacting perceptions, education and research within the social work discipline. Recommendations include: primarily, social work doctoral programs in transitional countries build capacity by preparing qualified social work doctoral students who will be able to plan, propose, and implement research that contributes to the profession's knowledge base for that country. Secondly, in order to promote sustainability, doctoral programs should have high standards in developing funding institutions that will support building a research infrastructure for schools of social workin transitional countries. Essential to this process is the integration of a multidisciplinary team of faculty, scientists, researchers, and students committed to advancing solutions to social issues in their regions. Thirdly, schools of social work need to establish the fiscal resources necessary to help faculty members establish productive research programs (such as course releases, class buyout policies, and proposal development funds and grants and contracts). Finally, promotion of social work research within the academic community, and broader society, including politicians,should help the former Soviet Union countries build better social welfare and health policies, disseminate innovative approaches for ameliorating and preventing social problems,and facilitate evidence-based, sustainable solutions to emerging public health and social challenges affecting vulnerable populations.These changes will result in improved service provision for clients, increased academic vigor within social work programs, expanded research endeavors, and renewed respect for the discipline of social work.

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