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Value-Based Social Work Research: Strategies for Connecting Research to the Mission of Social Work

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Abstract

Social work practitioners are often ambivalent about the necessity of conducting research. Witkin (1995) suggests that the reason may have little to do with adequate training in research methods and more to do with a lack of an approach to research consistent with the mission of the profession. The purpose of this article is to begin a dialogue that focuses on delineating an approach to social work research that is consistent with the mission and values of the profession. A description of research approaches that share aspects of social work values is provided, followed by a discussion of core elements of each approach that may have implications for social work researchers. The core elements discussed include: (a) research that is shaped, guided, conducted, and even controlled by consumers; (b) research that focuses on communities or local contexts; (c) research that strives for mutual understanding; and (d) research that facilitates social change leading to empowerment, equality, and social justice. Finally, challenges to incorporating these core elements into research practice are discussed.

Keywords: Research methods, participatory research, empowerment research, constructivist research, social work research.

Social work is a value-based profession. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, “Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” (2008, p.1). It is further stated in the Code that this action-orientation extends to all professional activities, including research and evaluation. Witkin (1995) stated that the social work profession “...has a unique commitment to a contextual understanding of people, an explicit value-base that emphasizes human rights and human dignity, a commitment to serving marginalized and oppressed people, and a mission to foster a more just society” (p. 427). Johnson (1995) stated that “social work practice involves a creative blending of knowledge, values, and skills” (p. 43). However, social work has struggled with determining what role research should play in promoting the values of the profession. Witkin, for example, stated that the nature and purpose of social work research is not known and that the profession has thus far failed to “...articulate an approach to inquiry that is rooted in the mission and values of the profession and the realities of practice” (1995, p. 426). Finn (1994) suggested that, “social work must develop change-oriented, value-based models of knowledge development that address people, power, and praxis” (p.25).

Grinnell (2001) defined research as “structured inquiry that utilizes acceptable methodology to solve human problems and creates new knowledge that is generally applicable” (p.14). According to Grinnell, the purpose of research can be either pure or applied. The intent of pure research is to develop and modify theory and contribute to the social work knowledge base, whereas the purpose of applied research is to investigate problems and generate potential solutions that emphasize social work practice. There have been many developments in social work research methods in recent years that suggest that the purpose of social work research can extend beyond traditional concepts of research and can be conceptualized as an intervention strategy (Pennell & Ristock, 1999). Haraway (1997), for example, described research as one tool among many with which to think rather than an objective activity that dominates knowledge production. In a practice setting, research should support social workers in seeking understanding of social problems and not constrain or limit their creativity in seeking knowledge to address social ills. The purpose of this article is to review several value-based approaches to research and discuss aspects of each that may strengthen links with the value-base of the social work profession and with practice.

There is a decades-long line of questioning of traditional approaches to social work research and alternatives to this approach to examine (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999). Below is a description of research approaches that share aspects of social work values followed by a discussion of unique aspects of these approaches that social work researchers should consider when conducting research. With varying degrees, the implications are relevant for all social work research despite differences in paradigmatic and methodological positions. Cannella and Lincoln (2004) suggested that “liberatory research that includes the voices of research participants and includes them in all forms of research can be applied even to traditional forms of research” (p. 171). However, this discussion would be incomplete without first examining epistemology and the implications for research methods.

Epistemology

Pennell and Ristock (1999) discussed the uneasy relationship between science and practice and how it is taught in social work programs. They suggested that social work education is guided by the “Platonic assumption that rational knowledge precedes and guides correct practice and the positivist assertion that valid knowledge is generated through objective study detached from personal and political strife” (p. 471). Research approaches that are explicitly action-oriented and guided by values are often criticized as being non-rigorous (i.e., not meeting accepted research quality standards) because they are not considered to be objective. However, most social philosophers suggest that objectivity is not possible and should not be used as a standard for judging the rigorousness of a research project (Lather, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that values influence all research in several ways, including: choice of the problem, choice of paradigm to guide the problem, choice of theoretical framework, choice of data-gathering and data-analytic methods, choice of context, treatment of values encountered within the context, and choice of format for presenting the findings. In fact, Lincoln and Cannella (2004) suggested that many forms of alternative research may be more rigorous because they make values and potential biases explicit, whereas values are not required to be stated in traditional research projects. Therefore, to be considered as a tool for stimulating change, social work research must break from the constraints of value neutrality.

Foucault (1970) suggested that human inquiry can and should be more reflexive. Reflexivity is an acknowledgement that knowledge is ever changing and there is always the need to “re-think” a social problem in spite of what we think we know from our science. Human understanding emanates from the perspectives of what is seen and felt (Lather, 2006). Scientific “facts” as they are portrayed may influence what people think and feel, but it is individuals’ contemplations that generate their personal knowledge. Yet, the prevailing social work science asks researchers to ignore these personal filters in favor of an unachievable objective lens. According to Lather, “the goal of research should be to promote understanding, reflection and action instead of a narrow translation of research into practice” (2006, p.788).

Action has become a controversial issue in discussions surrounding research paradigms. In social work, the issue is particularly troublesome. Social work is a profession that promotes social action. Yet, using research as a means of prompting action is seen as a contaminate of the research process by the positivist and post-positivist paradigms that suggest that action on the part of research practitioners interferes with the goal of objectivity. However, action is seen as a meaningful and important outcome of research from interpretivist, constructivist, and participatory phenomenological perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Moreover, action is the cornerstone of social work practice at all levels. Social workers do not simply observe social and personal problems; they strive to change them.

All cultures seek knowledge and have established unique ways of understanding our world. Western philosophies, however, have consistently upheld the preeminence of objectivity and rationality as the one true way of seeking understanding and have devalued the knowledge seeking practices of non-western cultures (Harding, 2002 Pennel & Ristock, 1999). Harding advocated for a multi-cultural philosophy of science whereby the world’s citizens join together to create “theories of knowledge and philosophies of science for the world we find ourselves in

today” (2002, p. 52). Harding warns against romanticizing other cultural knowledge systems as better than or an improvement upon western science. All cultural knowledge systems are flawed, hence her call for cultural unity. Who understands the experience of child abuse better, the child who experienced it, the caregiver who inflicted it, or the researcher who documented it? Ultimately this is a question of whose account of history we trust or value more.

Many alternative approaches to research have been labeled as dangerous for their lack of scientific relevance. Social work is no exception to this labeling. The irony is how this perspective directly conflicts with the value-base of the profession. Lincoln and Cannella (2004) identified these theoretical and methodological “dangers” as having most often addressed civil rights, disability rights, racial issues, multiculturalism, women’s rights, and other issues that social workers embrace. What is needed in social work is a science that takes values and power structures seriously. Below is an attempt to begin to tie some of these values into the “practice” of social work research. It is also an attempt to develop new approaches and procedures, which are based on the NASW Code of Ethics, that will guide social work researchers in the same way that it guides direct practitioners. Harding (2002) suggested that we do not need to choose one or the other; rather, we should explore, together, a third path that combines elements of all approaches.

Value-Based Approaches to Research

The following research approaches emphasize unique guiding principles for the conduct of research. This discussion, however, is not intended to focus on which research method should be used in social work. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested that it is acceptable for researchers to work between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms. The following approaches share many core strategies and values, but each presents at least one unique dimension that relates to the mission and values of social work. The five approaches discussed are: (1) action research, (2) participatory-action research, (3) constructivist research, (4) empowerment research, and (5) emancipatory research. It should be noted that the author recognizes that there are many other potential approaches (e.g., Critical Theory, feminist methods, liberatory) that should be included in this discussion, but in the interest of brevity the list is limited to only a few. Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, differ from the above mentioned methods only in the sense that the intended outcome is observation and improved understanding of a phenomenon. Whereas the other methods add a value focus and purpose to a research endeavor. Hence, an ethnographic study may explore and describe the experience of a phenomenon; a value-based method uses research as a tool to promote change.

Action Research

Kurt Lewin introduced action research in 1946 as a strategy for changing systems while at the same time generating critical knowledge about systems (Lewin, 1946). Rappaport (1990) defined action research as “research that aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to provide the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework” (p.4). The purpose of action research is to design studies to identify and solve problems for specific groups of individuals with change as the intended outcome (Soltis-Jarrett, 1997). According to Soltis-Jarrett (1997),

action researchers value collaboration, acquisition of practical knowledge, organizational change, and intervention. Action research should always be conducted in the setting where the problem occurs, and the focus is usually on a single site. Entire populations are studied rather than samples drawn from a diverse population. Emergent design and collaboration with non-researcher participants are recommended as strategies. Action research has evolved by adding the dimension of consumer participation, resulting in Participatory-Action Research (PAR).

Participatory-Action Research (PAR)

Participatory-action research closely parallels the mission of social work. Swantz (1996) refers to PAR as a strategy to develop “living knowledge,” where the researcher acts as a catalyst for promoting the idea of inquiry into issues that are of interest to the people directly affected by an issue. PAR combines consumer participation with the goal of social action. PAR is a strategy in which participants have substantial control over and participation in the research process (Cancian, 1993). The purpose of PAR is to conduct studies designed by groups of participants that emphasize identification of issues that emerge from critical examination and reflection. PAR researchers, such as Swantz (1996) and Cancian (1993), highlight four main characteristics of PAR are: (a) participation of community members in research, (b) consciousness raising and education of participants, (c) inclusion of popular knowledge, and (d) political action.

Participatory researchers challenge inequality within the research process and within society by combining scientific investigation with political action (Cancian, 1993; Small, 1995). Small (1995) suggested that the primary goal of PAR is to bring about a more just society through the development of knowledge about an issue to facilitate social change. Research is viewed as an intervention that aims to eradicate inequality and empower individuals. Finally, participatory researchers are committed to empowerment and learning for all participants engaged in the research process. In this sense, research can promote consciousness-raising and the development of a critical awareness of self in the context of his/her environment.

The next approach, constructivist research, emphasizes shared knowledge and cautious generalizations that are time and context bounded.

Constructivist Research

Constructivist research emphasizes understanding from the insiders’ perspective, mutual understanding, and shared knowledge development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivist research is generally conducted in the setting where the problem occurs, and the focus is usually on a single individual or site. Constructivist researchers believe that understanding cannot be achieved without experiencing stakeholders and the contexts in which they live (Rodwell, 1998). Constructivist researchers strive for equality by acting as students of the perspectives of stakeholders, and they pass what they have learned from stakeholder to stakeholder. The researcher engaging in the constructivist research process serves a collaborative role and avoids a controlling role. Another dimension that the constructivist approach adds is a focus on research that holds as its goal individual and community change. Finally, conclusions are reached through a process of negotiation between all stakeholder groups and the inquirer(s) resulting in a reconstruction of knowledge from the varying perspectives of all stakeholders.

Empowerment research shares many of these goals but emphasizes individual change and the uncovering of circumstances that lead to oppression and domination.

Empowerment Research

Empowerment research emerged from the discipline of community psychology (Rappaport, 1990). The concept of empowerment refers to the unequal distribution of power in society and the idea that people need to feel a sense of control over their lives (Pomeroy, Demeter, & Tyler, 1995). Those with power exert control and domination over the powerless while the powerless experience oppression and domination. Research conducted from an empowerment perspective emphasizes power relationships that exist between researchers and participants and should promote elimination of these power differentials by giving voice to participants (Small, 1995).

Empowerment researchers assist participants with identifying research questions that promote recognition of their strengths and acquisition of knowledge to gain control over oppressive forces in their lives (Small, 1995). The key to empowerment and to empowerment research is to shift the focus of research from an end product to the acquisition of skills that promote on-going, self-generated change, and knowledge development (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998). Empowerment research is concerned with the examination of relationships within and among individuals, groups, settings, communities, cultures, and social policies that promote oppression (Rappaport, 1990). According to Pomeroy et al. (1995), "Research and intervention are interdependent and simultaneous, making the process of research as important as its product" (p.91).

Finally, emancipatory research, adds the dimension of consumer control over all aspects of research.

Emancipatory Research

According to Irwin (2006), there are three fundamental tenets of emancipatory research approaches. First, all social interactions involve unequal distribution of power. The goal of emancipatory research is to uncover power differentials and shift power to the powerless. Alleviating personal and social ills requires the uncovering of personal, political, and economic interests that influence knowledge production; promoting free exchange of perspectives; and linking knowledge with emancipatory action (Pennel, & Ristock, 1999). Second, emancipatory research should promote consciousness-raising through participation in research and the production of knowledge. Finally, teaching people to be observers of their own circumstance will raise awareness of oppressive structures and build a desire to change those structures (Irwin, 2006).

Chappell (2000) discussed the use of emancipatory research with individuals with learning disabilities. Emancipatory research with individuals with disabilities involves five key components. First, research should be used as a tool for improving the lives of individuals with disabilities. Second, individuals with disabilities should be provided greater opportunities to become researchers. Third, researchers must adopt a more reflexive stance regarding their work. Fourth, democratic organizations for individuals with disabilities should act as commissioners and funders of disability-related research. Finally, researchers should be accountable to the

democratic organizations of people with disabilities (Chappell, 2000). The distinguishing feature of emancipatory research is that consumers gain creative, financial, and practical control over research related to issues that concern them.

Elements Consistent with the Mission and Values of Social Work

The preceding approaches to research highlight many strategies consistent with the values of the social work profession. Distinct elements of each approach define a purpose or purposes of research that promote the mission and values of social work. Below is a discussion of these elements that social work researchers may want to consider incorporating as part of their research practice. Based on the preceding review of the literature, the elements consistent with the mission and values of social work appear to include: (a) research that is shaped, guided, conducted, and controlled by consumers; (b) research that focuses on communities or local contexts; (c) research that strives for mutual understanding; and (d) research that facilitates social change leading to empowerment, equality, and social justice. Table 1 provides a visual representation of the elements of each method that are consistent with the values of social work.

Table 1
Methods Consistent with Social Work Values

	Shared control of research process	Focus on Communities or local contexts	Mutual Understanding	Social Change/Social Justice Outcomes
Action Research	X	X		X
Participatory research	X		X	X
Constructivist Research		X	X	X
Empowerment Research	X			X
Emancipatory Research	X			X

Research that is Shaped, Guided, Conducted, and Controlled by Consumers

Social workers are equal participants in the change process with consumers as opposed to sole change agents. In fact, a core value of the profession states that, “Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process” (NASW, 2008, p.6). Therefore, it is logical that social work researchers use their skills to facilitate research in partnership with consumers. The preceding research approaches vary in the degree of control that consumers have over the research process—from passive collaboration to active participation to emancipation. The point is to recognize the importance of including consumers in the research process. This could involve a passive approach whereby the researcher consults with a consumer advisory group to design a study. A researcher could take a more active approach and assist a consumer group in obtaining funding for research and assist in implementing the study in a technical advisory role. Participatory approaches add the dimension of skill development and a level of control in the

research process, while emancipatory approaches encourage complete control over the research process. All participants should feel a sense of collective ownership of the research in which they participate. By relinquishing degrees of control over the research process, social work researchers can become valuable technical consultants whose role is to support and collaborate with consumers in conducting research that is meaningful to consumers.

Research that Focuses on Community Needs

The action, constructivist, empowerment, and PAR perspectives emphasize research that is generated for use by communities. Communities are where practice and policy are experienced. What happens locally, however, is influenced by national and state policy as well as local circumstances. Community-based research, therefore, can link the experience of local program recipients and practitioners with the end products of the national, state, and local contexts in a comprehensive way. According to Healy (2001), PAR strives to “connect local action to large-scale, progressive social change” (p.93). Empowerment research, for example, seeks to uncover structures within local communities that oppress individuals so that these structures can be changed. By studying communities, researchers are conducting holistic research that incorporates national, state, and local contexts with the experiences of individuals in communities. The idea is to encourage more community-based research that may prove meaningful to stakeholders in communities.

Focusing on community-based research does not imply the sole use of qualitative methods. In fact, it implies mixed-methods research that can capture the scope, depth, and essence of an issue. For example, a researcher investigating the maltreatment of children with disabilities in a community may consider using case reviews of founded cases of abuse to determine the scope of the issue and then partner this approach with focus groups with caseworkers, consumers, families, and other stakeholders to gain an in-depth appreciation for challenges to families and providers. Focusing on community-based research is intimately linked with the emphasis on using research to generate change. In the above example, the purpose of conducting such a study may be to uncover the unique needs of children with disabilities so that the child welfare system can be more responsive to their needs. Hence the implications become important for change in the studied community, but the implications may also extend to other communities. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this process as the transferability of findings.

Research that Seeks Mutual Understanding

How findings are interpreted is critical to generating knowledge that is useful to those most directly affected by an issue. Traditional research leaves this critical phase up to the primary researchers, often individuals who do not share the experience of research participants. The constructivist concept of shared knowledge development and mutual understanding challenges this notion. In the constructivist approach, it is not enough to collaborate with stakeholders in the research process; the researcher must facilitate a dialogue among all stakeholders and generate mutually agreed upon findings (Rodwell, 1998). Just as Bronstein (2003) suggested that interdisciplinary collaboration improves service delivery by bringing together the creative expertise of multiple disciplinary perspectives, research findings can be more powerful by bringing consumers, families, providers, and researchers together to seek understanding of

complex social issues through a process in which findings are negotiated. In this sense, research becomes a truly democratic process giving equal voice to all participants in the development of knowledge.

Research that facilitates social change leading to empowerment, justice, and equality

The idea that research can be viewed as an instrument for change is not new. The Settlement House movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is an example of how research can be used to empower individuals, change communities, and influence policy (Carson, 1990). Research, therefore, can be viewed as an intervention. Typically, change occurs in reaction to reports that are written at the completion of research projects. Change, however, does not only occur in reaction to completed research; the process itself can facilitate change. The process by which social workers engage in research can have profound effects on participants and on the systems with which they interact. Collaboration and participation with consumers and other relevant stakeholders can challenge the traditional power that researchers have in the development of knowledge through education of consumers, consciousness raising, and infusing the voice of consumers in the policy-making process. In this sense, research is an intervention, with the purpose of facilitating individual empowerment and elimination of oppressive social structures.

Research can have profound effects on participants through sharing of knowledge, training to become researchers, and shifting control to consumers and consumer run organizations. Such efforts can lead to the development of a critical awareness of issues that affect individuals. Freire (1973) described this as the development of a critical consciousness, wherein individuals become more aware of the issues that affect them and the social conditions that foster oppression. The development of a critical consciousness fosters a belief that individuals have the power to change these conditions. On a community level, social change can occur by examining the power structures within communities to identify oppressive structures and then working together to change these structures. On a societal level, change can occur through infusing consumer voices into the policy making process. Constructivist and empowerment research emphasize empowerment of individuals and change in community structures, whereas action research, emancipatory research, and PAR promote research that leads specifically to political action. Adopting any or all of the preceding value-based research elements will strengthen the connection of social work research to the values of the profession. However, there are obstacles and challenges to promoting value-based approaches to research.

Challenges

Lincoln (1998) feels that academics in the United States who wish to engage in alternative research have to contend with a promotion and tenure process that classifies research as a product or commodity. The social change aspects of these approaches are not valued in higher education reward systems. Faculty researchers face a dilemma. While they may be concerned with empowerment and social action, their employer may be concerned with mass production of knowledge (Cancian, 1993; Lincoln, 1998).

Funding for value-based approaches to research is another challenge because of the added investment in time and money to conduct such studies. Funding sources are interested in cost

efficient research that focuses on generalizable knowledge. Education and training of stakeholders to become active participants in the research process must be a prerequisite for participation. Training may present some unique challenges with potential research participants. For example, Ward and Trigler (2001) felt that their PAR project failed because of difficulties participants with intellectual disabilities had with extrapolating findings beyond their own experiences. While the purpose of this discussion was to review several value-based approaches to research and their connection to social work, the next step should involve a “how to” discussion that delineates strategies for incorporating value-based elements into the research process.

Conclusion

Social work practitioners are often ambivalent about conducting research. Witkin (1995) suggested that the reason may have little to do with adequate training in research methods but more to do with a lack of an approach to research that is meaningful in practice settings. I believe that focusing on local needs, including consumers’ voices, and the emphasis on action will build stronger connections between research and practice. By conceptualizing research this way, practitioners may begin to view research as a practice technique and may be more likely to involve themselves in research. Promoting value-based research approaches will require changes in how social work educates its students and how we enhance opportunities for funding.

Teaching research to aspiring practitioners at the BSW and MSW levels needs to focus more on examining research as a tool for change and less on single methods and data analysis. We need to teach students what to observe (e.g., social injustice) as well as how to observe (e.g., design and data analysis). This can be accomplished by connecting course work with hands-on community-based research projects using a service learning approach to conduct community-based projects (Shannon, Kim, & Robinson, 2012). A similar change needs to occur at the Doctoral program level as well. Doctoral graduates have the added complication of having to respond to promotion and tenure committees and rigid funding structures. Change on this level can only be achieved through sustained advocacy. Social workers need to be involved in government grant review panels, promotion and tenure committees, politics, and everywhere else where power is exercised. However, nothing will change until power structures within our profession can begin to discuss the need for change. This discussion will only happen when the usefulness of value-based approaches is demonstrated in practice, and a critical mass of publications has emerged.

Any form of research eventually generates a narrative about what is and what should be. It is important to recognize that once a narrative exists, it is incomplete because something is left out. The paradigm debates of the last 30 years asked us to choose a side—to accept one truth about the nature of reality. It is time that the field of social work stands and shouts what it values, and the way to shout that message is through its program of research. The profession constrains itself to conservative power structures when it promotes a single paradigmatic and methodological perspective. *The Washington Post* published an editorial by George Will that attacked schools of social work for being institutions of indoctrination to the liberal perspectives of the profession (Washington Post, 2007). Will specifically attacked the core values of our profession (social justice, empowerment, opposition to oppression and domination) as being anti-American. The

point that Will is missing is that social work promotes democracy as a core aspect of its stated mission by supporting the voices that often go unheard. Using research methods that add the voices of the unheard will strengthen our democracy and make it more vibrant. Lincoln and Canella (2004) assert that research should,

Promote a free and open debate, in a democratic forum where all voices have a right to be heard, critical not only to maintaining academic freedom but also establishing Western universities as sites that support and uphold democratic principles (p. 179).

Social work, through its programs of research, can and should adopt a value-based approach to research that challenges and confronts the current networks of political and public power that control what knowledge is sought and who is entitled to produce and receive this knowledge.

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