

1 | Critical Infrastructures for Social Work Practice Research

Pondering the Past, Framing the Future

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THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES ON critical infrastructures that have shaped the current status of social work practice research and, in turn, will shape the course of future research. It sets forth a partial and selective perspective that no doubt will be augmented and complemented by the views of others. Additional relevant infrastructures are not examined here due to space constraints; they are considered in substantial detail in a more comprehensive companion paper (Feldman 2005). Ultimately, an authoritative history of social work research must examine all facets of the research enterprise and synthesize the perspectives of multiple observers.

The Practice Research Enterprise

The most determinate factor in the development of meaningful practice research is the extent to which critical infrastructures are created to promote and sustain the research enterprise over the long run. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully comprehend the complexities of practice research without recognizing its three central and interrelated aspects: research development, research dissemination, and research utilization. Each is critical to the advancement of social work practice. Indeed, the development of

research-based knowledge is of little consequence if it is not followed by effective dissemination and utilization. Although social work has made substantial strides in research development and, to some extent, in research dissemination over the years, relatively few gains have been made in actual utilization by practitioners. In its own right, the latter topic merits heightened attention on the part of social work scholars.

In considering research development, three critical infrastructures are reviewed here: landmark reports and task forces; significant educational trends; and major associational structures. Other relevant, but less determinate, infrastructures discussed elsewhere include important conferences and meetings; research centers and institutes established at schools of social work; research programs conducted at social work agencies; international research consortiums and collaborations; public and private funding sources for research; and prestigious awards and prizes for exemplary research (cf. Feldman 2005).

In considering research dissemination, one major infrastructure will be examined in particular detail, namely, professional journals and books. Other dissemination infrastructures are discussed elsewhere (Feldman 2005) and include conferences and reports; electronic dissemination mechanisms; and agency-based, school-based, and associational research dissemination efforts. Research utilization is considered here only briefly.

Research Development

Social work research suffers from a fundamental paradox. The dimensions and importance of the paradox will become increasingly evident as the following infrastructures are examined.

Landmark Reports and Task Forces

Since the very inception of social work, important new directions for the profession have been galvanized by landmark reports and task forces. These include, of course, the classic Flexner Report delivered ninety years ago at a meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (Flexner 1915) and, in later years, the Tufts Report issued under the aegis of the Russell Sage Foundation (Tufts 1923) and seminal reports about social work education such as those by Hollis and Taylor (1951) and Boehm (1959). However, landmark reports and task forces are more often the exception than the rule. Far more numerous are the countless reports that come to naught. Yet even these can inform our understanding of the formidable challenges that beset efforts to advance social work research.

An example is a promising report issued in 1989 by a Task Force on the Future of Social Work Education, formed by the National Association of

Deans and Directors of Social Work Schools (NADD). Titled “Proposal for a Comprehensive Study of Social Work Education,” the report asserted that “the time is nigh for social work to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth study of the present state and future needs of social work education” (National Association of Deans and Directors 1989:4).¹ The task force members recommended that a central concern be “the nature of the knowledge base of social work.” They observed that “it will be useful to articulate the extent to which social work knowledge should be endogenous (that is, generated primarily within the profession) or exogenous (that is, generated outside of the social work profession, but adapted or modified for social work education and practice)” (*Ibid.* 21). The report especially emphasized the importance of examining “the range and quality of social work scholarship and the extent to which the scholarly literature is incorporated into professional training” (*Ibid.* 21). Anticipating that such a study would cost slightly more than \$1 million, NADD then decided to form a second task force to seek funds to implement it. However, that task force faltered and a unique opportunity to strengthen and refine social work research failed to materialize.

In sharp contrast, a particularly influential report was issued in 1991 by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Task Force on Social Work Research.² That task force directly addressed many of the extant challenges to practice research in social work and, more important, yielded unprecedented results in advancing social work research. Declaring that a “crisis” existed, the report’s authors forcefully asserted:

- There is a paucity of social work research and researchers in critical areas of social work practice.
- A critical gap exists between the studies being carried out by researchers in schools of social work and the knowledge needs of social work practitioners and the service agencies in which they work.
- Extant patterns of research dissemination are fragmented and inefficient in getting research-based information to social work practitioners.
- There are critical problems in how research is taught at every level of social work education and, in particular, in social work doctoral programs.
- Existing organizational and funding resources are not sufficient to support research development in social work.
- Few social work researchers are included in the national bodies that determine research priorities and government research policies pertinent to social work practice.

Importantly, these concerns and others articulated in the report also were accompanied by a detailed plan of action that called for:

- An Office of Social Work Mental Health Research Development in NIMH that is responsible for an expanded program of recruitment, research training, and research career development related to mental health research priorities.
- A program of Social Work Research Development Center awards, including flexible funds for research infrastructure development and the support of developmental research projects in mental health.
- A National Institute for the Advancement of Research in Social Work with responsibility for supporting research development throughout the profession in all practice areas with the support of national professional associations in social work.
- A staff position for research development advocacy in NASW and a staff position for research education development in CSWE.
- Improved research education in baccalaureate and master's degree programs.
- Corresponding changes in the policies and standards for accrediting schools of social work.
- Improved research education in doctoral programs.
- Strengthened research support structures in schools of social work.
- Development of research partnerships between schools of social work and service agencies.

In a subsequent report published eight years later, the chairman of the NIMH Task Force inventoried the impressive progress that had been made (Austin 1999). For instance, NIMH had funded nine research centers at schools of social work in the United States and had sponsored important programs of technical and educational assistance for social work researchers. In 1993 the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) emerged from the task force's recommendations. The chairman of the NIMH Task Force served on IASWR's first board of directors and IASWR's interim director also had been a member of the task force. Regrettably, current data about NIMH funding of social work research are not available. NIMH reportedly no longer publishes funding allocations by awardees' disciplinary or professional affiliation.

Despite the significant advances stimulated by the report of the NIMH Task Force, certain recommendations remain unrealized. Research training has improved markedly in many doctoral programs, but much less so in others. Neither NASW nor CSWE has yet established a staff position dedicated expressly to the advancement of research for social work practice. Nor has it yet proved possible to secure sufficient congressional support to establish a National Center for Social Work Research at NIH. In this regard and others,

social work has yet to attain parity with some allied mental health professions. Since the NIMH Task Force on Social Work Research was formed in 1989 and its report released in 1991, it appears timely for a second NIMH Task Force to be convened and, even more, for social workers to explore the feasibility of similar initiatives at other units of NIH such as the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA), the National Institute of Aging (NIA), and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Significant Educational Trends

The last half century has witnessed unprecedented growth in social work education programs. In 1953, for example, the United States had only 53 graduate schools of social work. By 1992, there were 114 graduate programs plus 302 undergraduate programs, a total of 416. Today there are 191 accredited MSW programs and 460 accredited BSW programs—an increase of 63 percent since 1992! Although many, and perhaps most, social workers look favorably upon such rapid expansion of the profession's educational sector, significant liabilities attend this rate of growth.

From a research development perspective, the nearly unbridled proliferation of educational programs in social work can be regarded favorably only to the extent that it is accompanied by corresponding advances in research productivity and knowledge development. Data regarding the growth of doctoral education in social work are illustrative in this regard. In 1960, for example, only 10 social work doctoral programs existed in the United States. This number grew to 32 in 1980 and 46 in 1993. Today there are 73 doctoral programs. But while the total number of programs has increased steadily, their annual number of graduates has not. Instead, throughout the last three decades the average number of doctorates awarded in social work has remained stable, between roughly 200 and 300 per year. Whereas 243 social work doctorates were awarded in 1992, for instance, there were only 250 in 2002. Hence, while baccalaureate and master's programs in social work (and, correspondingly, their cumulative numbers of graduates) have proliferated over the years, the average number of doctoral graduates in social work has remained inordinately stable—some would say stagnant—for at least three decades. Moreover, only a fraction of doctoral graduates embark upon careers in education and/or research.

Barring significant shifts in educational policy or unforeseen technological breakthroughs, these trends portend that the present and projected numbers of social work doctoral graduates will be grossly inadequate to staff our profession's current education and research programs, much less those educational programs that will enter candidacy for CSWE accreditation in the coming years. In fact, if each of the current educational programs were

to hire merely one new faculty member per year, the extant supply would still fall far short of demand. Indeed, if only *half* of the currently existing programs were to hire just a single new faculty member per year, it would be necessary for every doctoral graduate of every annual cohort to pursue a career in social work education. It is unlikely in the extreme that existing programs, on average, will hire only one new faculty member per year. It is absolutely inconceivable that 100 percent of social work doctoral graduates will embark upon academic careers and, if so, that all would have the career commitments and research competencies necessary to become productive practice researchers.

In short, the unprecedented proliferation of social work education programs has not been accompanied by corresponding growth in the number of doctoral graduates required to staff them and to conduct sound research aimed at advancing the knowledge base of social work practice. To the contrary, the educational sector confronts a steadily widening and perhaps irreversible gap between demand and supply for doctoral-trained social work researchers and educators. Given the above-described trends, it is nearly certain that the limited pool of qualified doctoral-level educators will be fragmented among many different programs that, on average, yield fewer graduates per program than in previous years. Furthermore, the disparity between the total number of social work education programs and the number of doctoral graduates available to teach in them will continue to grow and, in fact, accelerate. These trends seriously threaten the long-term quality of social work education and social work practice. From virtually every perspective, they bode ill for the cost-effectiveness, success, credibility, public acceptance, and future well-being of the social work profession. Several strategies for possibly resolving this conundrum are discussed elsewhere (Feldman 2005), but none offers an easy or assured solution. Perhaps the most productive would entail vigorous efforts to steeply raise the accreditation standards for *all* social work education programs, particularly with regard to the required ratios of doctoral-trained faculty.

A closely related topic is the content and substance of research training in social work education. Especially germane in this regard is the “foundation” curriculum content required for CSWE accreditation at the baccalaureate and master’s levels. Due in part to the report of the NIMH Task Force and subsequent lobbying by numerous organizations and individuals, CSWE’s accreditation policies and standards concerning research education in social work have been upgraded appreciably in recent years. The latest revision of accreditation standards incorporates many new requirements concerning research (Council on Social Work Education 2003). Students now are required to know more about research methods, the importance of research, and evaluation

of their own practice interventions. But, importantly, CSWE's accreditation standards typically are sufficient rather than optimizing. The standards for research training remain minimal in most respects.

Similar concerns pertain to doctoral education in social work. To date, social work educators have strongly resisted efforts to establish accreditation policies, standards, and mechanisms for doctoral education. Many observers rightly attribute this to dissatisfaction about the barriers to curriculum innovation often imposed by CSWE accreditation policies. However, paralleling the trends observed in baccalaureate and master's education, social work doctoral programs with scant or questionable resources have proliferated rapidly in recent years. Therefore, it appears timely to seriously consider the accreditation of doctoral programs in social work. If meaningful leadership is to be exercised in this realm, however, it must be by institutions whose overarching interest is in doctoral education and research. Moreover, any such initiative should seek to optimize the quality of doctoral education rather than solely set forth minimal standards for accreditation. Finally, with regard to advanced education, it is germane to note that very few postdoctoral programs exist in social work. The dearth of such programs needs to be addressed if the profession is to progress toward higher levels of research productivity and practice excellence.

Major Associational Structures

Throughout its history social work has been shaped by numerous associations and organizations that have sought to advance the profession or certain of its special interest constituencies. Among relevant examples are:

- 1917 National Conference of Charities and Corrections (subsequently became National Conference of Social Work and then National Conference on Social Welfare)
- 1917 National Social Workers' Exchange
- 1918 American Association of Hospital Social Workers
- 1919 National Association of School Social Workers
- 1919 American Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work
- 1921 American Association of Social Workers (evolved in part from former National Social Workers' Exchange)
- 1926 American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers
- 1927 American Association of Schools of Social Work (evolved in part from former American Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work)
- 1930 American Public Welfare Association

- 1935 National Conference on Social Work (evolved in part from former National Conference of Charities and Corrections)
- 1936 American Association for the Study of Group Work
- 1942 National Association of Schools of Social Administration
- 1946 Association for the Study of Community Organizations
- 1946 National Council on Social Work Education
- 1946 American Association of Group Workers (evolved in part from former American Association for the Study of Group Work)
- 1949 Social Work Research Group
- 1949 Committee on Inter-Association Structure
- 1950 Temporary Inter-Association Council of Social Work Membership (evolved in part from former Committee on Inter-Association Structure)
- 1952 Council on Social Work Education (evolved in part from former National Council on Social Work Education and former American Association of Schools of Social Work)
- 1955 National Association of Social Workers (evolved in part from seven earlier groups: American Association of Group Workers; American Association of Medical Social Workers; American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers; American Association of Social Workers; Association for the Study of Community Organization; National Association of School Social Workers; Social Work Research Group)
- 1968 National Association of Black Social Workers
- 1970 Association of American Indian Social Workers
- 1971 National Association of Puerto Rican/Hispanic Social Workers
- 1971 National Federation of Societies for Clinical Social Work
- 1981 Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education
- 1982 American Association of Industrial Social Workers
- 1982 National Conference of Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools of Social Work
- 1984 National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (evolved from former National Conference of Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools of Social Work)
- 1994 Society for Social Work and Research
- 2000 St. Louis Group for Excellence in Social Work Research and Education

Today there are perhaps forty to fifty associations and organizations whose members are predominantly professional social workers. However, they vary considerably with regard to priorities and membership. Importantly, most of the above-mentioned associations now are defunct, perhaps the foremost being the National Conference on Social Welfare. Few ever

regarded the advancement of social work practice research as a top priority and many others devoted substantially greater effort to rhetoric about the importance of research than to actions aimed at developing and conducting research. More detailed information about many of these associations can be found in discussions by Alexander (1987), Bernard (1987), Brieland (1987), Goldstein and Beebe (1995), Lloyd (1987), Polansky (1977), Popple (1995), Tourse (1995), and Williams (1987).

A particularly notable, albeit short-lived, advance in associational infrastructures for social work research was the Social Work Research Group. Established in 1948–1949 under the aegis of NASW, it brought together some 600 members with interests in social work research. As described elsewhere (Maas 1977), the group's members were responsible for a series of documents on the "functions" of social work research and for sponsorship of research meetings at the National Conference on Social Welfare. Shortly after its formation, however, the Social Work Research Group lost its separate identity when NASW terminated all of its special interest subgroups and merged them into a centralized association with a more generalist orientation toward social work. After evolving into the Research Section of the newly organized National Association of Social Workers, the Social Work Research Group was for a short time responsible for a research segment of NASW's journal. It also generated a series of small research conferences, beginning in the mid-1950s with a meeting on research in the children's field.

Since its formation in 1955 NASW has played a noteworthy role in advancing social work research. Among many contributions, it is responsible for introducing *Social Work Research and Abstracts* to the professional literature, producing the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, and publishing numerous texts and compendia that have contributed to the advancement of practice research. Many of NASW's recent publications are useful resources for both social work researchers and practitioners. NASW also has been a key partner in providing financial support for the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR). Nevertheless, only a very small portion of NASW's financial resources are directed toward research development. Instead, issues like licensing, public image, and social workers' salaries are among its foremost priorities (see, for instance, *NASW News* September 2001:3). Ironically, it would seem that the latter concern can be addressed most fruitfully by means of compelling research that demonstrates to a skeptical public what many social workers already know, namely, that social work constitutes one of the best possible investments of scarce societal resources. It is there that NASW can profitably redirect more of its own fiscal resources.

Since 1952 CSWE also has played a key role in promoting social work research. It too provides ongoing, albeit modest, financial support for IASWR.

For decades, CSWE's annual conferences have featured research studies, workshops, and informational sessions about funding sources for social work research. In recent years, however, its contributions in this regard have been eclipsed by the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR). To date, neither CSWE nor NASW has established a formal staff position dedicated expressly to promoting advances in social work research. Moreover, as CSWE has grown in size, many of its key decision makers seemingly have become less receptive than before to the needs of research-oriented schools of social work.

The National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD) was established in 1984 by social work deans and directors who were, in large part, concerned about CSWE's impact on social work research and education, or lack thereof. The vast majority of its original members were deans and directors of educational institutions strongly committed to social work research. Over the years NADD task force reports have advocated vigorously for the advancement of social work education through rigorous research (see, for example, National Association of Deans and Directors 1989, 1997). In recent years, however, as in CSWE, the rapid growth of NADD's membership seemingly has weakened its capacity to address the interests of research-oriented schools of social work and to significantly advance research.

The most recent professional association formed expressly to advance social work research is the St. Louis Group for Excellence in Social Work Research and Education, created in June 2000 when the deans and directors of 29 research-intensive social work schools convened in St. Louis, Missouri.³ The criterion for participation was an active research portfolio with at least \$3 million of extramural funding. The overarching purpose of the group was to strengthen social work education by means of research. Among other initiatives, the group has sought significant modifications in CSWE accreditation policies regarding social work research. However, as with CSWE and NADD previously, the St. Louis Group has expanded very rapidly in only a few years. By 2005, it had 55 members—an increase of 90 percent in merely five years. Although this rate of growth might be regarded as an indicator of potential to advance social work research, the criterion for participation in the St. Louis Group gradually has been relaxed in recent years. The group's commitment and capacity to spearhead significant advances in social work research and education may decline accordingly. Its long-term impact remains uncertain.

Despite these mixed efforts to build associational infrastructures for social work research, two uniquely promising research-oriented organizations have been formed by social workers in the last thirty years, namely, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) and the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR). The former, formed in 1981, consists of the directors of all social work doctoral programs in the United States and Canada.

It has played an integral role in improving and expanding research-oriented doctoral education in social work. A major contribution was made in 1992 when GADE issued a landmark report that set forth guidelines for strengthening the quality of doctoral education in social work (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education 1992). The membership of GADE currently consists of the directors of 73 doctoral programs in the United States plus an additional seven from Canada, and one from Israel.

SSWR, established in 1994, now has some 1,300 members.⁴ More than any other association in social work's modern history, its members are actively engaged in practice research. Its annual meetings provide invaluable opportunities to present and discuss research, attend workshops that provide training and funding opportunities, and recognize the achievements of both accomplished and beginning investigators through conferral of highly regarded research awards. Even more, through its sponsorship of *Research on Social Work Practice*, it plays an ongoing role in strengthening and extending the dissemination of research-based practice knowledge. At this juncture of its development, perhaps SSWR's primary challenges are twofold: first, to assure that its members do not unduly neglect the other central components of the research enterprise, namely, dissemination and utilization, and second, to encourage approaches to research and publication that extend beyond many of the traditional, formulaic, or sterile models that often characterize social science research. If these pitfalls cannot be avoided, SSWR could inadvertently contribute to a widened gap between research and practice not unlike those found in allied professions with different membership organizations for researchers and practitioners.

Because individual research careers often are guided more by the availability of funds from federal and private sources than by the urgent needs of practitioners, SSWR can potentially play a central role in the future of social work research by conducting large-scale assessments of the profession's knowledge base and informational needs and, even more, by helping its members to forge some degree of consensus about the most pressing research challenges and priorities. Likewise, it can advance the enterprise by promoting studies and convening special conferences on the utilization of research, bringing together working groups of researchers and practitioners, and sponsoring special journal issues that improve linkages among research development, research dissemination, and research utilization. In short, as SSWR promotes research development, it needs also to recognize continuously the importance of initiatives in the other two central components of the research enterprise, dissemination and utilization.

SSWR's membership of some 1,300 researchers appears impressive in view of the fact that this organization has existed for hardly more than a decade.

Its current size suggests that a critical mass of researchers now may be developing in social work. Yet it also must be recognized that 152,000 social workers currently are members of NASW and there may be 300,000 to 400,000 more social workers who are not members. Absent dramatic breakthroughs in research and/or technology, these figures again raise the question of whether or not there are enough social work researchers to service the knowledge development needs of the profession. Equally sobering is the realization that the current membership of SSWR is only slightly more than double the 600-person membership of the Social Work Research Group that existed some five decades ago. From an associational perspective, it seems obvious that the growth rate of the research sector in social work has not kept pace with the growth rate of the practice sector.

Research Dissemination

Despite noteworthy progress in research development, such advances will amount to little if they are not disseminated effectively to practitioners. Until recent years, the dissemination of practice research in social work has been accomplished by highly traditional mechanisms such as conferences, workshops, and professional publications.

In the last two decades social work has seen a marked upsurge in print and electronic publications. Examples include refereed professional journals and targeted book publication programs under the imprimatur of major presses such as Oxford University Press, Columbia University Press, Sage Publications, Lyceum Books, John Wiley and Sons, Haworth Press, and others. Some of the latter products are extensive syntheses and compilations of practice-relevant research while others are textbooks and resource compendiums (cf., for example, Bloom, Fischer, and Orme 2006; Potocky-Tripodi and Tripodi 1999; Rapp-Pagliacci, Dulmus, and Wodarski 2004; Reid and Smith 1989; Roberts and Yeager 2004; Rothman and Thomas 1994). However, the quality of these products varies considerably. To date, only a handful of books and journal articles effectively link research and practice in ways that can systematically guide practitioners' assessments and interventions.

The existence of a vast array of books and journals of varying quality poses formidable problems of selection for social work practitioners. The library of one major school of social work, for instance, offers readers access to nearly 600 professional journals, of which approximately 250 appear in print version. But it is doubtful that most practitioners can subscribe to more than a few journals. This author recently surveyed 52 journals of particular interest to professional social workers. Of these, 18, or 35 percent, have been launched within the last two decades. Yet it is virtually impossible to gauge the actual

impact of these and other professional journals upon social work practice. Despite repeated requests, for example, circulation data were not available for 28, or 54 percent, of the journals. Seventeen, including many sponsored by national social work associations, treat their readership as classified proprietary information. Eleven more did not reply to repeated inquiries about their circulation. Hence, it is impossible to determine even the readership of many social work journals. More important, there have been very few efforts to gauge the relative impact of various social work journals on the actual behavior of practitioners. In its own right, this topic constitutes an underrepresented and much-needed area of research inquiry.

Among major social work journals, circulation data could not be obtained for *Social Work*, *Social Work Research*, *Social Work Abstracts*, *Social Service Review*, *Health and Social Work*, *Journal of Social Work Research and Evaluation*, and *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*. Of the research-oriented journals for which data were available, *Research on Social Work Practice* reported a relatively impressive circulation of 2,003. This has been achieved in part by offering subscriptions to the journal in conjunction with SSWR membership. In contrast, the *Journal of Social Service Research* reported a circulation of merely 135. Both figures pale in comparison to the reported circulation for *American Journal of Psychiatry*: 37,568.

Given recent advances in reproducing professional journals and circulating their contents electronically, subscriptions alone are an inadequate indicator of the actual readership and/or utilization of most journals. Nevertheless, it is essential for a research-based profession to be able to gauge the relative and overall impact of its professional journals. This is especially the case when questions abound concerning the rigor, quality, and effect of journals. In social work, vigorous debates have emerged in recent years not only about the quality of journals but also about the credentials and expertise of editorial "gatekeepers" (see, for instance, discussions by Browning and Winchester 1999; Epstein 1999; Ginsberg 1999; Karger 1999; Kreuger 1999; Lindsey 1999; Midgley 1999; Pardeck and Meinert 1999a, 1999b; Reamer 1999). Given numerous questions about quality, it is far from certain that the proliferation of social work journals in recent decades has been accompanied by corresponding gains in rigor and utility. Such concerns warrant examination on the part of those who wish to advance social work research and its application by practitioners.

To effectively employ research findings, social work practitioners must identify the most rigorous and applicable journals and eschew those that fail to meet acceptable standards. Beginning progress is being made in this realm of inquiry. For example, in a study of 299 research-based articles that were nominated for SSWR's outstanding research awards, Craig, Cook, and Fraser (2004) found that more than one third had appeared in merely three

journals, namely, *Research on Social Work Practice* (13 percent), *Social Work* (11 percent), and *Families in Society* (11 percent). The criteria for nomination included social significance of the problem being addressed; suitability of the research design; appropriateness of data, text analysis, and interpretation; potential for replicability; clarity of application to social work; and attention to gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other issues of difference. Among the remaining top 10 journals were *Social Work Research* (6 percent), *Journal of Social Work Education* (5 percent), *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (4 percent), *Child and Youth Services Review* (3 percent), *Child Abuse and Neglect* (3 percent), *Social Service Review* (3 percent), and *Psychiatric Services* (3 percent). From the perspective of rigor and applicability, it seems that social work practitioners might be well advised to subscribe mainly to these journals.

In one of the few studies concerning the impact of social work journals on citations and the work of fellow scholars, Lindsey and Kirk (1992) observed that the social work profession is served well by several core journals that have consistently improved their contributions over the years. These journals publish information that others read and use in subsequent work, thus leading to the accretion of a cumulative knowledge base. Lindsey and Kirk's analysis indicated also that some journals publish work that is seldom used and apparently has little effect on the profession. They comment that these need to ensure broader dissemination if their articles merit reading and use. If, however, their articles are of limited value, editors need to further examine their editorial policies to ensure that the profession will benefit from their journals. In a more recent study, Lindsey (2002) analyzed the relative impact of child welfare journals of special interest to social workers by determining how often their articles appeared in research cited in the *Journal Citation Report* of the Institute for Scientific Information. Respectively, the four journals with the greatest impact were *Children and Youth Services Review*, *Social Work*, *Health and Social Work*, and *Social Service Review*.

In a study of eight refereed journals that often publish articles on social group work, Feldman (1986) found that only 10 percent of the articles on this topic exemplified research or surveys. Of these, very few were characterized by statistical tests, control groups, baseline periods, or the analysis of more than a score of subjects. The preponderance of publications were merely anecdotal descriptions of group work programs that provide few reliable guidelines for practitioners. An updated analysis examined 254 articles on group work that appeared in *Social Work Abstracts* from 1977 through 2003. Fewer than a dozen entailed research employing a true experimental design, and none constituted a large-scale multifactorial field experiment (Feldman 2004).

A more comprehensive study by Rosen, Proctor, and Staudt (1999) analyzed 1,849 articles in 13 social work journals and found that less than half

actually qualified as research. Moreover, only 15 percent of the research-based articles actually tested an intervention. Of those, less than half contained enough information to permit replication. Similarly, the analyses reported by Craig, Cook, and Fraser (2004) indicate that the vast preponderance of journal articles nominated for SSWR outstanding research awards (67 percent) are mere surveys. Of the quantitative studies nominated for a SSWR award, only 14 percent were experimental. Others were quasi-experimental (14 percent) or pre-experimental (4 percent). The authors duly note, “Compared with survey methods, intervention research, which should obtain high priority in a practice profession, is less frequently nominated [for SSWR awards]” (51).

These reports point clearly to the need for increased rigor and practice relevance in the articles published by social work journals. Editorial practices, the expertise of editorial boards, and the actual readerships of social work journals merit closer attention from researchers and practitioners. The publishers of social work journals should be urged to place information about their circulation in the public domain. Strengthened efforts should be made to publish professional journals that aim expressly to apply research to social work practice in ways more readily useful to practitioners. Moreover, at least a few journals ought to be primarily “translational,” that is, designed to interpret the findings of research studies in ways that are clearly comprehensible and applicable to practice. In addition, more studies need to be conducted about the relative impact of major social work journals. Attention should be directed especially to their rigor, utility, applicability, and overall influence on social work practice.

Greater emphasis also needs to be placed upon the publication of in-depth syntheses, compendia, and meta-analyses of the research literature in various fields of social work practice. Examples include publications such as *Social Workers' Desk Reference* (Roberts and Greene 2002), *Evidence-Based Practice Manual* (Roberts and Yeager 2004), and the *Encyclopedia of Social Work, 20th ed.* (Mizrahi and Davis 2008). Additionally, researchers should be encouraged to report their findings in practice-oriented monographs, books, and manuals as well as journals. Such publications are more likely than journals to reflect the real intricacies of social work practice and to lend themselves to the elaboration of detailed interventions that can be of use to practitioners.

It should be noted also that rapidly evolving information technologies are exerting a profound influence on the dissemination of many kinds of knowledge. Electronic journals are emerging in social work. Web sites are being employed to greater advantage in order to disseminate the findings of research studies conducted by social workers and to distribute information about funding opportunities for investigators. Examples include sites sponsored by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research and the Society for Social Work and Research, and the “Information for Practice” site

developed at the New York University School of Social Work. Concurrently, management information systems that draw upon recent advances in storage, retrieval, and transmission of data are being employed increasingly by social work agencies.

A wide array of allied organizations also disseminate research-based knowledge that can be of particular value to social workers. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), for example, compiles and disseminates information regarding model intervention programs for substance abuse and related problems that have proved effective on the basis of rigorous research. Likewise, private foundations such as the William T. Grant Foundation and Casey Family Programs have created Web sites that disseminate the practical findings of research they fund. Finally, research dissemination is being advanced by a wide range of other mechanisms, including video conferencing, live video streaming, and geographic information systems. The extent to which these advances can be harnessed successfully by social work researchers and practitioners is bound to shape the future of the profession.

Research Utilization

By far the least developed leg of the tripartite social work research enterprise is research utilization. Major social work conferences often offer workshops, seminars, or lectures that introduce social work practitioners to new interventions. However, relatively few are grounded in rigorous empirical research. Moreover, such learning opportunities typically are compressed into brief sessions of merely an hour or two. Among the more fruitful initiatives are multiweek courses offered by the continuing education programs of social work schools and various service delivery organizations. With a few exceptions (cf., for instance, Grasso and Epstein 1992), only a handful of books and journal publications concerning research utilization have appeared in the social work literature.

Much remains to be done if social work is to develop effective mechanisms for apprising large numbers of practitioners about research-based interventions and how best to apply them. The potential consumers of research-based knowledge—namely, practitioners—may be better positioned than the producers of such knowledge to determine when and how it can be best utilized. Therefore, it is timely for direct service agencies to experiment with innovative mechanisms for facilitating and expediting the application of research-based knowledge by their practitioners. Among other things, it may be profitable for social work agencies to establish in-house units that collect and translate research findings for their own practitioners and, subsequently, to

develop pilot programs that test and refine promising research-based practice interventions. In its own right, research utilization is a young science that is insufficiently studied and calls for much greater research inquiry on the part of the social work profession.

Due to significant advances in many areas, the social work research enterprise never has been stronger or better developed than it is now. Yet, relative to present and emerging needs, the research enterprise arguably has never been weaker or less adequately prepared for the challenges at hand. This is one of many fundamental paradoxes that must be addressed if social work practice is to be improved by means of rigorous and meaningful research. The profession's policy makers must recognize the major forces that need to be addressed in all key domains. Above all, attention must be directed toward strengthening, refining, and expanding the most critical infrastructures for social work research, including especially those discussed here.

Notes

1. The members of the task force were Shanti Khinduka (chair), June Gary Hopps, Mark Battle, Don Beless, Scott Briar, Richard English, Patricia L. Ewalt, Ronald Feldman, Merl Hokenstad, Julia Norlin, Alvin Sallee, Barbara Shore, and Neilson Smith.
2. The members of the task force were David Austin (chair), Ronald Feldman (vice-chair), Glenn Allison, Scott Briar, Elaine Brody, Claudia Coulton, King Davis, Patricia L. Ewalt, W. David Harrison, Steven Segal, Barbara Solomon, Tony Tripodi, and Betsey Vourlekis.
3. The co-convenors of the June 2000 meeting were Paula Allen-Meares, Richard Edwards, Ronald Feldman, Marilyn Flynn, Shanti Khinduka, Edward Lawlor, James Midgley, and Ira Schwartz. Representatives attended from Boston University; Columbia University; Florida International University; Florida State University; Howard University; Portland State University; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Chicago; University of Georgia; University of Houston; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; University of Iowa; University of Kansas; University of Maryland; University of Michigan; University of Minnesota; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; University of Pennsylvania; University of Pittsburgh; University of South Carolina; University of Southern California; University of Tennessee; University of Texas, Arlington; University of Texas, Austin; University of Washington; University of Wisconsin, Madison; University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; and Washington University, St. Louis. Also invited, but unable to attend the meeting, were representatives from: University of Alabama; State University of New York, Albany; State University of New York, Buffalo; and University of California, Berkeley.
4. The members of SSWR's founding board were Janet B.W. Williams, Ronald Feldman, Charles Glisson, Mark Mattaini, Bruce Thyer, Joanne Turnbull, and Betsy Vourlekis.

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