

Research Integrity in Social Work: Status, Issues, and Future Directions

Margaret Gibelman, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, USA

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This paper explores the issue of scientific integrity in social work and its implications for the training of social work researchers. Data concerning a growing body of cases in which allegations have been made and/or violation of legal and ethical research standards have been substantiated illustrate that the integrity of research in social work and related fields is a growing concern. However, mechanisms to review and monitor social work research are under-developed compared to other disciplines. A research agenda is offered to assess the status of institutional systems to review and monitor research in social work and, concurrently, determine social workers' familiarity with the profession's ethical code as it relates to research integrity. Implications for faculty and practitioner education and training and the development and enforcement of systems to review the integrity of research protocols are explored.

Scientific misconduct or, more positively, appropriate conduct in the realm of research inquiry, is a topic that has received very little attention in the social work literature. Unfortunately, this is because social workers have not, historically, been strong contenders in the successful competition for federal research grants, particularly large-scale research protocols (1, 2, 3, 4). Social work research is still in its infancy compared to research in other disciplines. However, there is a professional commitment to increase the capacity and productivity of social work research, as evidenced by the burgeoning number of social work research centers and a growing empirical social work literature base. This expansion of social work research is not without risks. Although the majority of publicized cases of scientific misconduct have centered largely on bio-medical research and the applied sciences, the circumstances associated with these cases have strong implications for the preparation of students and the standards to which social work researchers will be held. The growing number of cases in fields related to social work, as discussed below, highlight areas of potential vulnerability.

The Status of Social Work Research

Unlike most of the social and behavioral sciences, social work is a practice-based profession rather than an academic discipline or field. Social work has been defined as the "applied science of helping people achieve an effective level of psychosocial functioning and effecting societal changes to enhance the well-being of all people" (5). Historically, its knowledge base has been predicated upon a liberal arts perspective and has drawn from psychology, psychiatry, sociology, political science, economics, and other disciplines to formulate applied practice principles. However, within the past two decades, social work has striven to define its own unique body of knowledge, an effort incorporated into the purposes of social work itself, one of which is "the development and testing of professional knowledge and skills..." (6).

Corresponding author: Margaret Gibelman, Yeshiva University, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, 2495 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10033, 212-960-0840 (voice), 212-960-0822 (fax), gibelman@ymail.yu.edu.

Although research has always had a place within the purposes of the profession, the larger socio-political environment has, in recent years, profoundly affected the priority afforded to research. There is a growing mandate for all social workers to incorporate research into their practice, a phenomenon underscored by the demands of funding bodies, oversight agencies, and consumer choice movements for hard data documenting that programs of service lead to tangible results. A leading force has been that of managed care, which has brought with it heightened demands for accountability, with particular emphasis on documenting the successful outcomes of service (7).

At the same time that external demands to provide empirical evidence of the impact and outcomes of services grow, social workers, to better protect the interests and well-being of the people they serve, are seeking to empirically examine the consequences of the managed care movement, itself. This has translated to a concern about documenting the effects of managed care (e.g., short-term hospitalization; short-term treatment; limited provider choice). These developments have led to the need for a new or enhanced repertoire of research skills on the part of not only academics and researchers, but among the totality of social workers directly providing, supervising, or managing the delivery of human services.

The long and ongoing admonishment that the profession must develop an internal research capacity has borne fruit. In fact, a notable number of studies have been conducted on the status of research productivity and the scholarly contributions of social workers (8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Perhaps the most significant influence, however, on the growing social work research enterprise has been the shift in criteria for tenure and promotion within academia, which remains the richest source of social work research (14, 15). Longevity of academic careers now rests firmly on scholarly productivity and standards related to both quality and quantity continue to rise as social work is increasingly held to the same standards as other academic and professional units within the university (4). A related factor in the emphasis on research productivity is the growing sophistication of faculty in identifying funding sources and competing successfully for publicly supported research dollars.

The emergence of schools of social work as

major research centers and the increased productivity of social work researchers has been long in coming. The mandate to create a coordinated research infrastructure had been echoed for two decades (16, 17, 18, 19). National Institute of Mental Health funding has been a major impetus to establish social work research centers at academic institutions. In this process, however, the profession faces a host of issues and challenges, foremost among them the preparation of future researchers, including socialization to the ethos of scientific integrity.

Ethical Guidelines

The latest revision of the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)(20) emphasizes the central role of research: “social workers should contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. Social workers should seek to contribute to the profession’s literature and to share their knowledge at professional meetings and conferences” (Section 5.01(d), p. 24). Section 5.02 (b) of the Code (1996) encourages social workers to “promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge” (p. 25).

The Code of Ethics not only seeks to establish an obligation on the part of social workers to engage in knowledge building through empirical research, but also provides the basic guidelines for how such research is to be conducted. Specific provisions pertain to risk-benefit analysis, voluntary and written informed consent, protection from harm, confidentiality, and accurate reporting of findings. Further, the Code sets forth the obligation of social workers to educate themselves and for programs of social work education to provide relevant education concerning responsible research practices.

An important caveat about ethical guidelines exists that is idiosyncratic to the profession — the limited application of the Code to social workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (21) estimates that there are approximately 542,000 professional educated social workers in the United States (at the bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral levels). At the same time, current membership of the National Association of Social Workers is approximately 155,000. The Code of Ethics is a product of the National Association of Social Workers and, upon joining,

members must pledge to abide by the Code. But what about the more than 387,000 social workers who are not members of NASW and not committed to abiding by the provisions of the Code? These social workers may belong to other professional associations which have their own ethical guidelines, but data to support this contention are lacking (22). Social work researchers based in institutions of higher education may have their own review and oversight procedures, separate from university-wide IRBs, but again there is an absence of substantiating empirical data. An unknown, but impressionistically high proportion of social work research is outside the purview of federal funding, which may mean that IRB review procedures are not applied. (It should be noted, however, that such research is now selectively being reviewed by IRBs to conform with their own internal procedures, partially reflecting the prevalence and influence of the growing number of studies sponsored by private sources, including pharmaceutical companies, in areas such as genetic testing (23).)

Finally, in some instances, social work research may be absent of any oversight by any source. This latter scenario is most likely to prevail among those working in service organizations which have not yet established review and oversight procedures and may, indeed, not even recognize the need to do so. Of particular concern is the mandate for practice agencies to engage in research without assurances of appropriate procedures and absent collaborations with educational institutions from which such protocols may be borrowed.

Learning from the Mistakes of Others

To date, public disclosure of cases of scientific misconduct within the social work research community have been absent. Over a 10 year period of vigilant reporting of scientific misconduct, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* referenced only one situation involving a social worker. This case concerned a researcher who submitted bogus articles to professional journals as part of an experiment to test peer-review practices (24). Because the research did not involve the use of Federal funds, review of allegations of ethical misconduct remained within the purview of the adjudication process of the NASW. Ultimately, NASW dismissed the complaint, arguing that the issue involved a disagreement over research methods rather than

ethics and that there had not been an explicit violation of the Code of Ethics (24). However, as social workers increasingly compete successfully for federal research funds, they become subject to the same level of scrutiny as researchers in other disciplines. Similarly, as IRBs extend their purview to include privately supported research, more diligent reviews of social work research protocols can be expected.

As the social work profession seeks to enhance its research capability in a credible and responsible manner, there is much to be learned from the experience of related disciplines and professions. In recent years there has been a growing number of cases of scientific misconduct among allied health-related industries (e.g., nursing, psychology, and psychiatry), the predominant theme of which concerns plagiarism and/or falsification or fabrication of data (25, 26, 27, 28, 29). Eight cases from the helping professions over the last decade were identified from media reports, out of an unknown universe of substantiated cases of misconduct. Unlike many cases of misconduct substantiated in the bio-medical fields, these cases were absent allegations of human subjects violations. However, findings of misconduct highlight the diligent reviews to which research reports are subject and the serious penalties that are levied when ideas are appropriated or results falsified. Sanctions include forced resignations, criminal prosecution, ineligibility from receiving publicly supported grants or serving on review panels, and remedial courses in ethics. These sanctions have widespread and serious implications for how research is conducted and highlight the potential consequences that may ensue when procedural and ethical breaches are uncovered.

Emerging Issues

The mistakes of researchers of allied disciplines suggest the scope and magnitude of potential areas of scientific misconduct that may similarly affect social work. Further, the record on misconduct shows that attention to the initial review of protocols is only a beginning step in an ongoing process necessary to ensure scientific integrity. Although a systematic process for reviewing research proposals, including attention to scientific validity of the study design, can alleviate many potential problems, it is in the reporting of research findings, at least to date, that the allegations of scientific misconduct are

most likely to occur. Reports of research are, in fact, reviewed; how research is carried out and findings reported are subject to scrutiny, and, sometimes, reprisals. This fact presents a formidable problem in balancing the traditional academic freedom associated with the pursuit of research and institutional responsibility to ensure accountability of the outcomes of such research. The extent to which a school of social work can monitor the work of its faculty and students is inherently limited.

While only about 30% of the cases of scientific misconduct are eventually determined to be founded, the impact of the allegations is profound (30). The investigation of allegations consumes significant institutional resources and can ruin careers, even if the allegations are unfounded. If allegations are confirmed, it is lethal to a researcher's career (see, for example, 31), causes reputational damage to the university, and may affect public perceptions of the integrity of all research. Worse, human lives and well-being may be compromised (4).

Internal systems to prevent and, when necessary, address scientific misconduct are not without their critics. There are enormous workload implications, particularly for senior faculty who may not have the time or desire to spend their time monitoring junior faculty. There are also those who argue that when schools/universities serve as the "scientific validity police" of their own colleagues, they will either join ranks in defense, or, to the other extreme, find against their colleagues for fear of accusations of institutional bias (32, 33).

Current Review Mechanisms

Since allegations and, in some cases, findings of scientific misconduct are, by definition, after-the-fact of the activity, the most significant lesson from these cases is the importance of ensuring that research review and monitoring procedures are uniformly followed. The integrity of scientific research is monitored by two main and distinct sources: professional associations and their applicable ethical codes and institutional review boards (IRBs). In social work, these mechanisms for ensuring research integrity are less firmly entrenched. As discussed earlier, there is no one body with the authority or jurisdiction to oversee the entirety of the social work research enterprise. The guidelines detailed in the profession's Code of Ethics about ethical research conduct are, however, limited by their

lack of applicability to a large proportion of social workers. Social work educators, who are the major producers of research, are ill-represented among the membership of NASW and are thus outside of its monitoring and adjudication provisions. Thus, the question of what mechanisms govern academic social work research remains unanswered.

The majority of schools of social work are housed in research universities which have their own IRBs and the logical source of research review and oversight lies with IRBs. However, the focus of many, if not most, IRBs on bio-medical research, with the composition of IRBs reflecting this emphasis, has limited the informed review of social work protocols. Social and behavioral science research protocols, including those of social work, are often "expedited" and/or are reviewed by researchers who are unfamiliar with the nature of such scientific inquiries. (An analogy holds when social and behavioral scientists are asked to participate on IRBs in the review of bio-medical research.) Without the procedures in place and a cadre of trained researchers available and able to review social work research protocols, social work may well be vulnerable to some of the questionable research practices that have been unearthed in related fields.

The expanding boundaries of what constitutes scientific integrity are of particular relevance to social work researchers. The research conducted by social workers, both students and faculty and agency-based practitioners, involves interaction with populations that are often classified as vulnerable and confidentiality of data is often an issue. Direct observations, the administration of questionnaires, review of existing case records, or the introduction of therapeutic interventions and the use of control groups that do not receive interventions may be innocuous or, alternatively, may pose risks to the emotional, social, or economic well being of participants (4). Deception, invasion of privacy, lack of informed consent, mandatory reporting requirements (such as cases in which potential child abuse is identified), or the loss of economic benefits (as may apply, for example, to the disabled or welfare recipients) are all examples of harm that may result from faulty research designs or misconduct in the implementation of research protocols (4). Although substantiated cases to date fall outside of these human protection areas,

the nature of the research conducted within the helping professions suggests the potential of such misconduct.

A Call for Research on Social Work Research

Given the relatively undeveloped, but now rapidly expanding research enterprise in social work, there is a clear need for information about how research is monitored and reviewed. The number of publicized cases of wrongdoing in fields closely allied with social work suggest that programs of social work education need to formulate or revise their procedures for research review and oversight. Institutional mechanisms are needed to ensure that: (1) researchers are cognizant of the ethical issues involved; (2) the protocols meet university and Federal standards; and (3) findings are based on systematic and valid research. The question then becomes whose responsibility it is to monitor such protocols and review the research conducted and how mechanisms can be established which significantly reduce the potentiality of scientific misconduct.

Some schools have assembled their own committees to review and pass judgment about compliance with university and/or federal research requirements. However, such reviews usually focus on issues of methodology and/or informed consent. This is not sufficient given the broadened definition of scientific misconduct, which has been extended beyond the initial focus on informed consent, risk levels, and coercion (34). The definition of misconduct now includes fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results” (35, p. 4). The extent to which social work education programs maintain their own review and oversight procedures is also unknown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such internal program mechanisms are the exception. Given the limited applicability of the professional Code of Ethics, the unknown degree of inclusion of social work within the purview of IRBs, and the similarly unknown degree of school-specific procedures, the need for “research on the status of social work research” is suggested. Possible areas of inquiry include:

- An analysis of the social work education curriculum to ascertain the degree to which ethical conduct is a component of research courses.
- An assessment of social workers’ familiarity with ethical

provisions regarding appropriate scientific conduct, through such means as: (1) an “exit” test of graduating BSW, MSW and doctoral students; (2) a sample survey of agency practitioners; and (3) a sample survey of agency administrators charged with responsibility to collect, analyze, and report on client-sensitive data.

- An analysis, perhaps through the use of focus groups, of issues and obstacles to the conduct of ethical research which result from the demands of external accountability bodies.
- An investigation of the procedures used by schools of social work to review and monitor faculty and student research, including the scope of such reviews and the extent to which the validity of the science itself is considered.
- A survey of social work faculty concerning their level of participation in university-wide institutional review boards.
- A survey of deans and directors of social work education programs to identify the frequency, nature, and types of issues and problems that have arisen in regard to studies, once approved and implemented.
- A content analysis of material covered in federally prescribed training of researchers and an assessment of the applicability of such training to the social and behavioral sciences.

The data emanating from such studies would provide a basis for an informed assessment of the extent to which mechanisms for research review and monitoring are in place and how well they operate. Such information could form the basis for developing or revising review procedures through university IRBs, through separate IRBs potentially established for the social and behavioral sciences, or through social work education-specific structures. Further, such information could be used to develop targeted educational programs about research integrity to the social work community.

Conclusion

Research about social work research has tended to be descriptive, often focused on admonishments about the under-developed state of the art or analyses of what content areas have been researched and what gaps exist. Ethical research conduct has, by and large, been ignored, in part because of the early stage of development of the research enterprise. However, the issue of research integrity takes on increasing importance as social work gains a legitimate role in the conduct of scientific inquiry. The profession is likely to experience a stronger imperative to engage in research as demands for accountability and documentation of the outcomes of human services continue to grow.

Strategies to ensure research integrity depend, first, on a clearly formulated agenda based on an assessment of the current status of review and monitoring systems. Based on hard data, the professional schools of social work and their universities can assume the task of modifying and strengthening procedures in a manner that is reflective of the burgeoning social work research enterprise. Means of prevention as well as amelioration need to be developed, codified, and enforced. In this process, there is a need to define the parameters of both appropriate scientific conduct and what constitutes misconduct as it relates to social work research and to elaborate on its meaning with some degree of precision. Clear university and school standards, widely publicized, and ongoing education regarding appropriate scientific conduct would help alleviate actual or potential problems as social work secures a more extensive and important role in the production of research.

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