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Research Orientation, Research Anxiety, Research Courses, and Empowerment Among Social Work Students

Douglas Crews, Brien Bolin, Kyong Hag Lee & David Groot

Abstract

The purpose of this current study was to determine if there is an association between research orientation and empowerment. Research orientation (the importance of research, usefulness of research, unbiased nature of research), research anxiety, and number of research courses taken were related to the empowerment of social work students. Three hundred sixty-three social work students were surveyed to explore the relationship between the research variables and the students' feeling of empowerment. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that research orientation, such as the importance of research and number of research classes taken, were significantly associated with an increase in social work students' feelings of empowerment. These results indicate social work students may be empowered through research and evaluation as part of the complexities associated with practice.

Research Orientation, Research Anxiety, Research Courses, and Empowerment among Social Work Students

Research as part of social work education is not a simplistic approach to explanation but an interpretive, ethically responsible, and complex process that uses critical thinking by integrating multiple sources of knowledge (CSWE, 2008; NASW, 1999; Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Grinnell, Williams and Unrau (2012) identify the goal for social work research is ". . . to present the research process with warmth and humanness so that student's first experience with it will be a positive one" (p. vii). Mischi, Probst, and Bradley (2009) believe that it is necessary for students to increase their sense of empowering feelings towards research. This may be accomplished by transforming students' perceptions of research from something needing to be done in an academic setting to an applied practical research standpoint. This transformation allows students to understand the impact research may have on clients. Thus, authors of the current paper believe that empowerment can be found in a complex, pedagogical, and social work practice when conducting research to improve one's competence and self-esteem.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) considers research an important part of social work's curriculum and competency based learning (CSWE 2008). CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) associate social work education and practice with two specific competencies, 2.1.3 and 2.1.6. These two competencies call for critical thinking to inform professional judgments and for social workers to be engaged in research informed practice as well as practice informed research (CSWE, 2008). The purpose of the current study is to explore the topic of social work students' research orientation as related to students' feelings of empowerment.

Empowerment is a central theme in social work professional practice and education. The concept of empowerment is widely discussed regarding many areas of social work practice and education; however, research is not often one of these areas. The current study will begin to bridge this gap and focus on the intersection of research and empowerment. The authors believe that research can be empowering in social work professional practice and education. Social work research's connection to the empowerment of students or social work practitioners has not been explored in the literature. Recent literature focuses attention on social work students'

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research anxiety as related to taking research courses or conducting research (Bolin, Lee, GlenMaye, & Yoon, 2012: Maschi, Wells, Slater, MacMillan, & Ristow, 2013). Other recent research focuses attention on self-efficacy and its relationship to learning about research or performing research tasks at work (Boswell, 2013: van der Westhuizen, 2014). Fetterman and Wandersman (2007) discuss the process evaluation and empowerment of the community as an outcome.

Literature Review
Social Work Empowerment

Empowerment has been a growing theme in social work education over the past three decades (Gutiérrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Lee, 2001). Boehm and Staples (2002) state ". . . empowerment refers to processes and outcomes whereby less powerful individuals and groups move to reduce discrepancies in power relationships either through zero-sum, win-lose strategies or mutual benefit, win-win approaches" (p. 450). Barker (2003) defines empowerment as "…the process of helping individuals, families, groups and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and develop influence toward improving their circumstances" (p. 142). These definitions of empowerment act as a guide to decrease inconsistencies in power relationships and a resource to improve circumstances. Social workers are able to apply empowerment in many contexts of practice. Past literature has associated the process of empowerment to various populations (Boehm & Staples, 2002) and social work education as connected to social justice and advocacy (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006; Payne, 2005).

Empowerment is a fundamental concept in social work education and practice. The concept of "power" goes to the heart of empowerment theory. Lukes (1974) described two aspects of power: "power to" and "power over." Power over typically refers to power as control or authority, while power to involves an individual's ability to act efficaciously to bring about desired results. Such power to is the focus on power as one's capability or abilities. This shift in how power is viewed is central to the meaning of empowerment as related to social work research in practice or in education. The experiences, competences, and skills necessary to actualize empowerment are consistent themes in the literature about this concept.

The helping process in social work defines empowerment as a way for clients to increase ". . . strength and develop influence toward improving their circumstances" (Barker 2003, p. 142). Gutierrez, Parsons, and Cox (1998) identified the four components of the empowerment process in practice as: 1) attitudes, values, and beliefs, 2) validation through collective experiences, 3) knowledge and skills for critical thinking and 4) action. These empowerment components of social work practice are broad, universal, and readily relevant to conducting research. Boehm and Staples (2002) found "…consumers viewed empowerment in terms of both process and products/outcomes, they definitely placed much greater emphasis on tangible results" (p. 457).

Empowerment and Self-Efficacy

Much of the literature on empowerment deals with elements of personal empowerment, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, mastery, perceived competence, or assertiveness (Boehm & Staples, 2002; Bolton & Brooking, 1998). Research self-efficacy has been found to relate to a student learning about research concepts and gaining confidence about research related tasks (Boswell, 2013). Whereas van derWesthuizen (2014) found that students did not perceive the usefulness of research following the completing of an online course. However, research by Wang, Zhang, and Jackson (2013) found a positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological empowerment. The current study explores learning about research, the process of conducting research, and its associations with empowerment and self-efficacy.

Research must be attached to tangible results and outcomes to improve social work practice. Montcalm (1999) finds this applied approach improves self-efficacy. Wang, Zhang, and Jackson (2013) additionally found a positive relationship between internal locus of control and psychological empowerment while finding a

negative relationship between external locus of control and empowerment. This internal locus of control, for the social work students can be associated with connecting the result of their research directly with client improvements. Additionally the accomplishment of research related task is also been found to be associated with increased self-efficacy (Boswell, 2013: van der Westhuizen, 2014).

Social Work Research and Empowerment

Research can be an empowering aspect of social work education and practice. Much of the literature surrounding social work and empowerment focuses on the concept of "empowerment evaluation" (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2007; Secret, Jordan, & Ford, 1999). The values and ethics of social work as expressed in the CSWE EPAS (2008) direct social work educators to infuse evaluation as part of practice into curriculum. Students may not always connect evaluation knowledge and skills to practice or feelings of empowerment. Lee (2001) suggests several dimensions of empowerment, which provide a linkage between research and empowerment. The one most resonate with the current study describes empowerment as ". . . a more positive and potent sense of self and the cultivation of resources and strategies or more functional competence, for attainment of personal and collective goals" (Lee, 2001, p. 34).

The evaluation of practice is part of a social worker's professional obligation (NASW, 1999, section 5.12; CSWE, EPAS 2.1.3, 2.1.6, 2.1.10d). Secret, Jordan, and Ford (1999) in their discussion of "empowerment evaluation" indicate that this approach allows stakeholders to determine program effectiveness, helps in problem solving, identifies resources, and promotes change. Evaluation in social work makes use of scientific research knowledge, techniques, and multiple methodologies to improve helping people help themselves. "Empowerment evaluators help create an environment conducive to the development of empowerment" (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007, p. 182). Engaging in community research with students can enhance the empowerment of

students (Lazar, 1991; Wells 2006). "Empowerment evaluation" has been conceptualized as ongoing self-assessment, program improvements through evaluation, and influencing policy development (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2007).

CSWE EPAS (2008) competency, 2.1.1 states that generalist social work practice "Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly" (p. 3). When research is external, the process may give the impression of distant from serving clients and identity as a social worker. Social work students see themselves as helpers and not researchers. Research needs to be internalized as part of service to promote social work self-esteem and empower competent service.

Anxiety and Research

Social work students often express anxiety associated with the research requirements in social work education. Accordingly, if social work educators are fostering empowerment in the process of completing research, students' perspectives on research must change. Rubin and Babbie (2014) state "Some students expect research to be cold, aloof and mechanistic: qualities that did not attract them to the social work field" (p. 17). The student's feelings of anxiety may lead to negative attitudes towards research (Lazar, 1991; Wainsock, 1994; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001; Maschi, et.al., 2007). This negative research attitude paired with anxiety becomes a barrier to gaining research knowledge, developing research skills, and developing self-efficacy (Montcalm, 1999), and "research as an empowerment activity" (Cox & Joseph, 1998, p. 178).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Three hypotheses have been developed from the literature reviewed in relation to the research question. First, social work students with a high level of importance of research, usefulness of research, or unbiased nature of research will have a high level of empowerment. Second, social work students who have a high level of research anxiety will have less social work empowerment. Finally, students who took more research courses

will have high social work empowerment. In addition, this study explored the impact of psychosocial factors on the empowerment of social work students.

Methods
Sampling and Procedure

This cross-sectional structured questionnaire was conducted through purposive sampling of 363 social work students. This self-administered survey was conducted in thirteen classes including the introductory course in social work, research classes. The survey took participants between 20 and 25 minutes to complete. All participants signed an informed consent form before their participation in the study. Researchers explained that the participants could decline participation as well as withdraw from the study at any time. This study received research approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the primary author's university.

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 66 with a mean age of 30.5 years. About 91% (n=331) were female. Seventy-five percent (n=274) of the sample were Caucasian, and approximately 12% (n=44) were African American. Full-time students were more than 80% (n=292) of the participants and part-time students were approximately 20% (n=73). About 24% (n=87) of the participants had not taken a social work research course, 28% (n=102) had taken one, and 48% (n=174) had taken two or more social work research courses. Demographic characteristics of the sample, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, are generally consistent with demographic characteristics of social work programs nationally (Lennon, 2002). Both t-test and χ^2 results revealed no significant differences in student demographics (age, gender, etc.) among different semesters.

Measures
Independent Variables

In this current study, there are five main independent social work research variables. These variables include three research orientation variables ("importance of research", "usefulness of research", and "unbiased nature of research"), "research anxiety," and "number of research

courses taken." First, this study used a modified Kirk-Rosenblatt Research Inventory (KRRI) to measure the importance of research (seven items), the usefulness of research (five items), and the unbiased nature of research (seven items) (Kirk & Rosenblatt, 1981). These subscales have a five-point Likert response format, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A previous study demonstrated high reliability scores for internal consistency in each scale (Kirk & Rosenblatt, 1981). Cronbach's alphas in the current study were .76 for importance of research, .85 for usefulness of research, and .83 for unbiased nature of research. Second, to measure the research anxiety of students, this study used a modified Abbreviated Math Anxiety Scale (AMAS) (Green et al., 2001). Previous studies have demonstrated high reliability scores with this scale for studying students with various majors (Hopko, 2003; Hopko, Mahadevan, Bare, & Hunt, 2003). In this current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .91. Finally, to measure the number of research courses, this study simply asked how many research courses students took. In addition, there are six control variables: four psychosocial variables and two demographic variables. Four psychosocial variables were measured, these include; being a "BSW or MSW student," "completed Algebra," "self-efficacy," and "computer anxiety." The "completed Algebra" variable was based on a question whether respondents successfully completed the course. To measure the self-efficacy of students, the current study used the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) (Montcalm, 1999). This scale consisted of ten items with a four-point Likert scale, ranging from not at all true to exactly true. Previous studies have used the GSE to study various populations (Bandura, 1989; Montcalm, 1999). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha of the GSE was .850. To measure the computer anxiety of students, a modified Computer Anxiety Scale (CAS) was used (Green et al., 2001). This scale consisted of 16 items with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Cronbach's alpha in the current study was .928. In terms of demographic variables "age" and "gender," "age" was a continuous variable while,

male was coded as one and female was coded as zero.

Dependent Variables

This study used the modified Social Work Empowerment Scale (SWES) in order to measure the empowerment of social work students (Secret, Romf, & Ford, 2003). This scale includes ten items with a five-point Likert response format, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Previous studies used the SWES scale to measure the empowerment of social workers (Frans, 1993; Secret, Rompf, & Ford, 2003). The Cronbach's alpha in this current study was .804.

Data Analysis

This study employed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis method to test the three hypotheses of the study using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 in order to examine the impact of different independent variable sets on a dependent variable as well as to understand the specific amount of variance in a dependent variable, which is accounted for by different models (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002).

Limitations

The current study had several built in limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sampling of participants was purposive. Purposive sampling prevents the generalization of the study's findings to other populations. To be more representative, studies in the future need to include participants from other social work programs. Additionally, random sampling methods need to be employed. Random sampling would allow an expanded understanding of the relationship between research orientation and research attitude. Second, this study used a cross-sectional survey method limiting application, and understanding long-term patterns of associations between research orientation and research attitude. Thirdly, this study did not control for other social work classes influencing the empowerment of social work students or the exposure to research as an externally driven aspect of social work practice. Finally, future studies may employ a

longitudinal methodology to understand patterns of research orientation with long-term empowerment as student's transition to professional social work practice.

Results
Means and SDs of Measured Variables

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of research orientation, research anxiety, self-efficacy, computer anxiety, and social work empowerment. In terms of importance of research, respondents generally reported that research was somewhat important, ranging from 5 to 25 with a mean of 17.73 (n=363, SD=3.32). In terms of usefulness of research, respondents reported that research was somewhat useful, ranging from 5 to 25 with a mean of 18.63 (n=363, SD=3.62). Unbiased nature of research scores ranged from 6 to 30 with a mean of 14.87 (n=363, SD=3.57), indicating that the participants did have a slightly biased nature of research. Research anxiety scores ranged from 8 to 40 with a mean of 23.52 (n=363, SD=6.26), indicating that respondents had some feelings of anxiety. In terms of self-efficacy, respondents had moderate self-efficacy, ranging from 21 to 40 with a mean of 32.79 (n=363, SD=3.77). Computer anxiety scores ranged from 16 to 71 with a mean of 31.97 (n=363, SD=11.65), showing that generally respondents did not have computer anxiety. In addition, in terms of social work empowerment, respondents reported that they had felt some social work empowerment, ranging from 10 to 50 with a mean of 39.15 (n=363, SD=5.04).

Research Orientation, Research Anxiety, and Research Courses Taken on Empowerment

In table 3, hierarchical regression results revealed the impact of social work research factors, psychosocial factors, and demographics on the empowerment of social work students. Demographic variables explain about 3% of variance (R^2) in the empowerment of social work students. In step two, demographics and psychosocial factors account for about 21% of the variance (R^2). In the final step, all independent variables explain about 24% of the variance (R^2).

In addition, there were no multicollinearity problems because the tolerance scores for all independent variables were greater than .538 (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002). The importance of research was significantly related to an increase of the empowerment of social work students (β = .194, $p \leq .05$). A higher number of research courses taken was significantly associated with more empowerment of social work students (β = .612, $p \leq .05$). Higher self-efficacy was significantly associated with more empowerment of social work students (β = .465, $p \leq .001$). Higher computer anxiety was significantly related to less empowerment of social work students (β = .-087, $p \leq .001$). In addition, age was a positively significant predictor to the empowerment of social work students (β = .089, $p \leq .001$). On the other hand, other factors such as gender, BSW or MSW students, completed Algebra, usefulness of research, unbiased nature of research, and research anxiety were not significant factors to the empowerment of social work students.

Discussion

The purpose of this current study was to determine if there is an association between research orientation and empowerment. The first hypothesis that students who placed a high level of importance on research had a belief in the usefulness of research, or had an unbiased belief in the nature of research would have higher levels of empowerment, was partially substantiated. The current study found that students who placed a high importance on research were more likely than other social work students to feel a sense of empowerment. This corresponds with Secret, Jordan and Ford's (1999) description of an empowerment evaluator as one who "foster self-determinism" (p.121). However, the discrepancy that research is not associated with social work practice is resolved when students develop a sense of accomplishment through determining program success or understanding of program effectiveness through the evaluation process (Boehm & Staples, 2002). Strategies of developing empowerment in the process of completing research would enhance student confidence and competence. This increased confidence and competence may in turn

translate into their professional lives with the explicit goal of using their research knowledge and skills to provide high-quality services, to initiate change, to improve practice, policy and social service delivery, and to evaluate their own practice (Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, & Metrey, 2002). These are unique findings, as past studies did not address the empowering aspect of research for social work students.

The second hypothesis was that students with high research anxiety would have less feelings of empowerment. A significant relationship between research anxiety and empowerment was not found in the current study. Social work educators need to continue to emphasize the importance of research as a component in the complex process of developing feelings of empowerment for social work students.

The last hypothesis asserted that students who took more research courses would consequently report higher levels of social work empowerment. This hypothesis was substantiated. Gutierrez, Parsons, and Cox (1998) identified attitudes, values and beliefs, validation through collective experiences, and knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action as the conceptualization of empowerment. These empowerment components of social work practice are broad, universal, and readily relevant to conducting research and connecting to empowerment evaluation associated with being a social work student. Thus, the current study found that students who took more research courses were more likely than others to have high social work empowerment, which was a unique finding.

Implications for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Implications were developed based on the results of the current research. Faculty who teach research and evaluation need to develop assignments focused on active learning that will use techniques which will help students apply research to social work practice situations. Thus, this will facilitate an increase in self-efficacy and empowerment within the students through outcomes that are directly tied to clients and improvements of services. Students need to view

research as relevant to social work practice. This can be done by building positive research perceptions through using classroom-learning experiences to decrease the anxiety around research, evaluation, and grant writing in a professional setting. Applied, hands-on, and holistic learning extends beyond the classroom and is anticipated to empower students and the social work practice community they serve.

Classroom instruction around research and evaluation needs a practical component to help build self-efficacy, confidence, and empowerment. This is often accomplished by student's involvement in data gathering, participation in focus groups, or examining community data that address a social problem. Faculty who teach research and evaluation need to develop collaborative approaches within the community to enhance the teaching and conducting of research and evaluation. These could incorporate the four components of the empowerment process as identified by Gutierrez, Parsons, and Cox (1998). First, social work faculty should establish positive attitudes, values, and beliefs related to research. Second, the social work educator should ensure that students complete projects that allow for success in the reporting of findings to a community or population. Third, research needs to build knowledge and skills as part of the critical thinking process (Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

Social work educators must have the necessary resources and administrative supports to teach research where students gain empowerment. This will lead to positive outcomes of the student research experience. This could be accomplished through the establishment of community and agency based research activities for students in social work, this would create a more familiar and "less intimidating space" (Bolin, Lee, GlenMaye, Yoon, 2012). Returning or non-traditional students may feel intimidated by the prospect of enroll in additional prerequisite math or computer courses. In order to build capacity towards reducing research anxiety and increasing personal empowerment, social work students need to familiarize themselves with concepts of research and the association to the improvement

in service to clients. Ultimately, this would provide social work students with applied research and evaluation skills that would directly connect to the practice community (Wells, Maschi, & Yoder-Slater, 2009; Moore & Avant, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that the student's research orientation is related to empowerment. The social work educator's task is to minimize student anxiety related to research as well as increase their exposure to how research is associated to social work practice and service to clients. Social work educators should focus on teaching and emphasizing the importance and the usefulness of social work research for their social work practice and career. The result would be empowering for the student, and the social work profession. Further, the study indicates that increased empowerment and self-efficacy is the results of carrying out meaningful research to improve social work service. Social work educators have an obligation to engage the students in building a research orientation to promote empowerment, self-esteem and the best service to clients.

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