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Educating Social Workers About Changes in the American Family: Evaluating the Impact of Training

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As we approach the 21st century, social workers need to be aware of the dramatic changes that are taking place in the American family. Although social work programs are revising their curriculums constantly to incorporate information on changes in family structure, it is far more difficult to inform professional social workers practicing in the field. Perhaps the best way to keep professional practitioners informed of changes in the various types of family forms is to educate them at continuing education seminars. Here is reported South Carolina's effort to educate social work practitioners about various trends influencing family structures and to explore the impact of these trends for effective social work practice. The program was sponsored by the Allied Health Education Consortium of South Carolina and was offered at seven sites throughout the state. Participants were awarded six hours of continuing education credit for attending the day-long seminar. The following discussion provides a brief description of the program material that was covered in the continuing education training.

The program was entitled, "Social Workers Redefining the Family of the 21st Century," and took place between October and December, 1998. All of the seminars were led by the author, who is a faculty member in the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina. The program material was divided into three sections, lasting approximately two hours each. The first section dealt with definitional issues in family development and began with an extended discussion of the various ways the term "family" has been defined. The second section involved both a discussion of the terms "normal," "functional," and "dysfunctional" and an exploration of the ways these terms have been applied to families. The final section of the continuing education seminar involved an exploration of sociological and demographic trends that have given rise to contemporary family structures.

The first segment of the continuing education training involved a discussion of the "modern-era" family. This type of family form involves an intact family where the mother is a homemaker and the father is employed outside of the home as the breadwinner. This type of family form represented the statistical norm for families in the modern era (i.e., post-WWII) and looms large in American culture as the "ideal" family form (Coontz, 1992; Hill, 1995). Therefore, given the consensus among Americans that this form is ideal, there were no detail explorations of the form. Rather, the initial two-hour segment of this continuing education training was focused on several possible reasons for the persistence of the "myth of the modern family" and an evaluation of this family form in terms of its impact on women and minorities (Walsh, 1993; Coontz, 1992; Weiner, 1997). The constructs of oppression, privilege, and patriarchy were discussed at length, and their relationship to the "modern-era family" were explored. Particularly important was the understanding that healthy, well-adjusted children are not directly related to family form and that many contemporary family forms are quite capable of fulfilling the essential functions of family (Gross, 1992; Hill, 1995).

The second two-hour segment of the seminar involved a discussion of the various ways the terms "normal," "functional," and "dysfunctional" have been conceptualized and applied to families. The fundamental idea conveyed in this segment was that traditional definitions of "normal" (i.e., normal as average, normal as healthy, etc.) are exclusionary and fail to reflect accurately the diversity present in American families (Walsh, 1993). Consequently, an alternative definition of "normal" that focuses on processes occurring over time (i.e., a transactional view) was advocated. Particularly important was the concept that families should participate actively in the process of defining normality for themselves. Another important aspect of this segment was the discussion centered around defining the concepts "functional" and "dysfunctional" (Walsh, 1993). The relationship between these definitions and the definition of normal as process were explored.

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The final two-hour segment of the seminar involved a discussion of the various sociological and demographic trends that have given rise to contemporary family structures. Several factors have influenced the decline of the "modern-era family" model including: (1) the impact of the women's movement; (2) the decline in real wages; and (3) the divorce rate (Goldscheider, 1997; Shellenberger & Hoffman, 1995; Skolnick, 1997). The impact of these trends on contributing to contemporary family structures were explored and discussed. Currently, dual-earner families have replaced "modern-era" families as the statistical norm in the 1990s, but no single family form has arisen to replace the "modern-era family" as the "ideal family" in American culture (Scott, 1993; Shellenberger & Hoffman, 1995). Finally, it was concluded that the vast demographic changes in American culture have created contemporary families that are quite diverse in form (Bianchi, 1995; Eggebeen, Snyder & Manning, 1996; Morrison, 1995).

Methods

Procedure

As identified, the purpose of the seminar was to educate social work practitioners about various trends influencing family structures and to explore the impact of these trends on effective social work practice. To evaluate the effectiveness of the training, a pre-test/post-test design was used. Data collection involved gathering pre-test data at the beginning of the training session and post-test data at the conclusion of the training session. The same 10-item, multiple choice instrument that covered the content of the program was used at both test periods (Appendix).

Participants

A total of 356 professional social workers across seven sites in South Carolina participated in this continuing education training. It is important to reiterate that the participants attended the training because it offered six contact hours of continuing education, which could be applied toward the 20 hours required annually for license renewal. Although attendance was not mandatory, many agencies provided participants with paid leave so that they could attend the seminar. The registration fee for the seminar was $50.00, and participants were provided with handout materials, a certificate of contact hours, continental breakfast, and lunch.

Table 1 shows: (1) age (2) years of experience (3) pre-test performance, and (4) post-test performance, of the participants at each of the seven sites. Overall, the participants ranged in age from 24 to 79 with an average age of 44 and reported an average of 13 years of professional experience. The majority of the subjects were MSWs (52%). The remainder were: (1) BSWs (25%); (2) MAs (13%); or (3) had other professional backgrounds (10%). The overwhelming majority were licensed to practice social work in the state (98%) with 30% as licensed baccalaureate social workers (LBSW), 48% as licensed Master's social workers (LMSW), and 20% were licensed independent social workers (LISW). It is important to note that licensure requirements in South Carolina have allowed for the licensing of non-social work degree professionals at the LMSW level.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N=356)

Location

Characteristic	1 (n=64)	2 (n=44)	3 (n=27)	4 (n=70)	5 (n=51)	6 (n=68)	7 (n=32)
	M (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)
Age	42 (9.3)	47 (13.2)	45 (10.3)	44 (9.2)	43 (11.1)	42 (12.3)	45 (9.8)
Years of Experience	11 (8.1)	14 (8.8)	12 (7)	15 (9.2)	11 (6.5)	12 (7.5)	13 (8.4)
Pre-test Score	42 (14.7)	48 (18.4)	36 (12.1)	45 (13.7)	40 (11.1)	41 (16.4)	43 (15.9)
Post-test Score	90 (12.2)	97 (7.1)	91 (9.2)	96 (8.1)	92 (9.3)	95 (8.3)	91 (9.0)

Results

The first research question investigated the relationship between test location and change in score between the two test periods. This question was of primary importance because if there were differences in the amount of change in score across the seven locations, the data from the seven locations could not be pooled. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure indicated that there was no significant difference ($F = 2.1$, $df = 6,344$, $p<.079$) in change in score between assessment periods among the seven training sites. Therefore, the data from the seven locations were combined in the remainder of the analyses.

The participants in this study had an average pre-test score of 42 and an average post-test score of 93. A paired-sample t-test was performed to assess change in score between the two test periods. The t-test indicated that the participants demonstrated significant improvement in their knowledge of program material at the conclusion of the training seminar ($t = 47$; $df = 348$; $p<.000$). In order to get a better understanding of the relationship between the various demographic variables and change in score between the two test periods, a regression analysis was conducted using change in score as the dependent variable. A linear regression procedure was used for the variables: (1) age, (2) degree, (3) professional license, and (4) years of experience. The model was not significant ($F =.473$, $df = (4,71)$, $p<.755$), and none of the variables contributed significantly to the model.

Discussion

The findings of this study would appear to have several important implications. First, the generally poor performance on the pre-test assessment suggests that the social workers in this sample were largely ill-informed about the rapidly changing family structure in the United States. Second, the results also suggest that these practitioners are receptive to new information regarding the changing family structure and that they can make significant gains in knowledge as a result of participating in continuing education training. Finally, the results of the regression analysis indicate that change in score is unrelated to demographic variables. Consequently, since the variable age was not a significant predictor of change in score between the two assessment periods, it seems plausible to conclude that more experienced practitioners are not "stuck in their ways" and are as receptive to new information as less experienced practitioners.

The findings illustrate that the social workers in this sample were largely unaware of the rapidly changing family structures in the United States. This is particularly troubling, considering the importance of families in social work practice. Unfortunately, given their lack of knowledge regarding contemporary family forms, it is possible that the social workers in this sample have been hampered in their work with clients because they failed to understand accurately the unique strengths and deficits of contemporary families. However, concern over this finding is tempered somewhat by other findings indicating that participants were receptive to new information and that they have the ability to participate in and learn from continuing education opportunities.

In the effort to keep social work practitioners informed about demographic and sociological trends that influence practice, there appear to be many potential benefits related to using continuing education as a forum for disseminating information. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that the participants are better informed about the evolution of the American family as a result of attending the training. Although this study did not evaluate the impact of this training on enhancing the social work practice of the participants, the results of the study are encouraging. Specifically, if we accept the theory that enhancing knowledge results in more effective practice, the findings suggest that the participants should be more effective in their work with clients. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that continuing education is fulfilling its mission in regard to keeping practitioners informed about the constantly changing world of social work practice.

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Appendix

Instrument

1. Which of the following is NOT one of the ways of defining "normal family development?"
   a. normal as average
   b. normal as healthy
   c. normal as optimal
   d. normal as traditional

2. The term "modern" as it relates to family refers to what historical era?
   a. the 1950s
   b. the 1960s
   c. the 1970s
   d. the 1980s
   e. the 1990s

3. In the first year following divorce, the average family income of women decreases by:
   a. 10%
   b. 20%
   c. 30%
   d. 40%

4. What percent of today's families have the father as breadwinner employed outside the home and a homemaker mother?
   a. 8%
   b. 18%
   c. 28%
   d. 38%

5. The divorce rate for second marriages is
   a. 40%
   b. 50%
   c. 60%
   d. 70%

6. In families where both parents work outside the home, women still carry what percent of household obligations?
   a. 60%
   b. 70%
   c. 80%
   d. 90%

7. Which of the following is NOT one of the primary tasks of divorce?
   a. emotional divorce
   b. community divorce
   c. psychic divorce
   d. relational divorce

8. Approximately how many children are newly affected by divorce each year?
   a. 500,000
   b. 1,000,000
   c. 1,500,000
   d. 2,000,000

9. What percent of today's married families are dual-earners?
   a. 50%
   b. 55%
   c. 60%
   d. 65%

10. A society in which formal power, both public and private, is held by adult men is called an:
    a. oligarchy
    b. patriarchy
    c. aristocracy
    d. matriarchy