Professional Development:
The International Journal of
Continuing Social Work Education

Integrating Standardized Measures into Social Work Practice: An Exploratory Study of BSW, MSW, and Continuing Education Curricula

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	*Integrating Standardized Measures into Social Work Practice: An Exploratory Study of BSW, MSW, and Continuing Education Curricula*
Author(s):	*Susan Dennison*
Volume and Issue Number:	*Vol. 5 No. 2*
Manuscript ID:	*52038*
Page Number:	*38*
Year:	*2002*

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are $110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org **Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact**

Integrating Standardized Measures into Social Work Practice: An Exploratory Study of BSW, MSW, and Continuing Education Curricula

Susan Dennison, ACSW, LCSW

Introduction

The evaluation of practice is no longer an option for the social work profession; rather, practice evaluation has become an integral part of social service delivery across client settings. Increased demands for accountability and cost effectiveness, diminishing resources, and organizational downsizing have resulted in social work's becoming an evaluation-driven profession. Assessments must be both rapid and accurate, due to growing demands for briefer treatment under managed health care and third-party payments. In addition, ongoing treatment services must demonstrate progress toward more measurable goals in order to secure continued funding. Cases that involve increased practitioner liability (i.e., clients who are dangerous to themselves or others) have also necessitated the use of quantitative data, along with clinical impressions, to support diagnosis and treatment planning. As a result, the profession of social work has had to shift its attention to the integration of practice procedures that address these new accountability demands.

Standardized assessment measures have increasingly been recommended to the profession as a means of addressing new accountability requirements. The practical applications of standardized measures for the purposes of assessment, evaluation of treatment progress, and determination of overall program effectiveness, has been well documented in the literature (Bloom, Fischer, & Orme, 1999; Ginsberg, 2000; Jordon & Franklin, 1992; Jordon & Franklin, 1995; Nugent, Sieppert, & Hudson, 2001; O'Hare, 1991). However, this social work educator has found, through repeated experiences over the past 15 years with student interns, that the profession has not fully embraced or integrated the use of standardized measures into practice. Students frequently report that their field instructors never use standardized measures as a part of their practice, and thus, do not know specific scales that students could use in their evaluation of client progress. Many social service agencies do not keep a supply of standardized scales in stock for their social work staff, and many may not even know how to order such instruments. Often, students find that they need formal clearance from program administration to use any standardized measures, since in many agencies that area of practice is assigned to a different mental health professional.

Why has this transition from verbal endorsement to actual application in practice not taken place? Has this area of practice been adequately addressed in undergraduate and graduate social work programs? What role does continuing education play in the effort to educate practitioners about the integration of standardized measures into practice? Survival in this new accountability environment requires that the profession examine these types of training questions in order to determine an effective means for integrating standardized measures more fully into social work practice.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to report the findings from a recent survey of all accredited social work programs in the United States. The survey examined the extent to which content on standardized measures is infused into BSW, MSW, and continuing education curricula. Four primary research questions were delineated for this exploratory study. First, are standardized measures for social work practice being infused into BSW, MSW, or continuing education curricula? Second, if this infusion is taking place, what instructional formats are being utilized? Third, how important do social work educators believe this infusion of

Susan Dennison, ACSW, LCSW, is an Associate Professor at the Social Work Department of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina 27412.

Correspondence should be addressed to: Susan Dennison, ACSW, LCSW, Social Work Department, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 444 Graham Bldg., Greensboro, North Carolina 27412.

Telephone: 336-334-4099

standardized measures is to the curricula? Fourth, what concerns have surfaced as this area of practice has been integrated into the curricula?

Review of the Literature

Before beginning this examination, it is necessary to define "standardized measures" for social work practice. Jordon, Franklin, and Corcoran (1997) define a standardized measuring instrument as one that has been constructed by researchers to measure a particular knowledge level, effect, or behavior of a client. Gabor, Unrau, and Grinnell (1998) further delineate this term, defining a standard measure as:

> *a paper-and-pencil instrument that may take the form of a questionnaire, checklist, inventory, or rating scale. Two factors differentiate a standardized measuring instrument from any other: the effort made to attain uniformity in the measuring instrument's application, scoring, and interpretation; and the amount of work that has been devoted to ensuring that the instrument is valid and reliable.* (p. 157)

Thus, these definitions will serve as a frame of reference for the purposes of this article and the related study.

In a review of the literature on social workers and standardized measures, no studies were identified that discuss to what degree, if any, social work education or continuing education curricula is addressing this specific area of practice. However, the social work literature clearly indicates a movement toward the use of multiple measures to assess clients' functioning and evaluate practice, combining more traditional non-standardized methods with standardized measures (Bloom, Fischer, & Orme, 1999; Jordon & Franklin, 1992; O'Hare, 1991; Royse & Thyer, 2000). Authors like Blythe and Tripodi (1989) have indicated that one of the primary ways for social work to bridge research methodology with practice is through the measurement of practice interventions. Bloom, Fischer, & Orme (1999) have suggested that "scientific practitioners" are needed in the profession to monitor and evaluate every agency case.

Due to the limited time and resources available for assessment and treatment, these helping professionals must be able to integrate contextual analysis (i.e., person-in-environment) with categorical analysis (i.e., use of time-efficient assessment instruments) (Mattaini & Kirk, 1991). It is no longer enough that treatment be effective; instead practitioners must be able to prove that the treatment of choice has results comparable to other effective interventions, and is the most cost effective, both in terms of time and money (O'Hare, 1991).

In light of social work's unique ecological perspective, researchers have identified several practitioner needs with regards to the use of standardized scales across practice settings (Mattaini & Kirk, 1991). The social work profession has recognized the necessity of using rapid, multidimensional assessment instruments that allow practitioners to simultaneously evaluate several problem areas (Hudson & McMurtry, 1997). There has also been interest in increasing the number of risk-factor assessment instruments used in particular practice settings (i.e., with adolescent suicide risk cases) (Balassone, 1991). Furthermore, social workers in health care settings (Van Hook, Berkman, & Dunkle, 1996) and geriatric settings (Fillit, 1994) are realizing the need for more rapid assessment tools due to the time limits imposed under managed health care.

In addition, the benefits of computerized assessment models have been recognized in the field (Nurius & Hudson, 1993), along with practice examples of models that can work for brief, crisis-oriented youth services (Franklin, Nowicki, Trapp, Schwab, & Peterson, 1993). In an effort to maintain the ecosystem's assessment framework of the field, there is an appreciation for collecting data from several sources within the client's environment (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987), along with combining the use of multiple assessment methods (Jordan & Franklin, 1992) so that a true person-in-environment assessment can be attained.

Even though the literature indicates a movement toward the integration of standardized scales into social work assessment and program evaluation, little has been written on how to teach such content in the classroom (Jordan & Franklin, 1992). Moreover, a study of licensed clinical social workers in Utah reported these professionals were more inclined to use pragmatic indicators, such as client statements, observations by practitioners, or intuition, rather than empirical methods, such as standardized measures, to evaluate their practice (Gerdes, Edmonds, Haslam, & McCartney, 1996). The research of Doueck & Kasper (1990) suggests that single session trainings on the integration of standardized measures could have a positive impact on practice. Therefore, it is important to note that practitioners may not require extensive training for integrating standardized scales into their practice; thus, further exploration of ways of infusing this topic into the curricula is warranted.

Method

A 17-question optical scan survey was mailed to the 576 (i.e., 405 undergraduate and 141 graduate) social work education programs accredited by, or in candidacy with, the Council on Social Work Education. Any social work school or department that did not respond within the first six weeks following the mailing was contacted by phone and requested to provide survey responses either to the phone interviewer or through a fax transmission of the survey. In addition, the researcher offered in the cover letter, to provide a complimentary course syllabus on "Integrating Standardized Measures into Social Work Practice" to any respondents who returned their surveys within six weeks of the initial mailing.

The one-page survey contained 17 questions that elicited identifying information on the reporting programs, along with specifics regarding the infusion of material on "social workers use of standardized measures" into their current curricula. The survey was composed of the following five categories of questions:

1. Five questions eliciting identifying data on the social work program.
2. Four questions on separate course offerings that cover standardized measures and social work practice, and students' response to that instruction.
3. Three questions on specific continuing education workshops on this topic and practitioners' responses to that training;
4. Four questions on the importance of including this topic in the curriculum or in continuing education programs, along with the department's future plans for doing so.
5. One final question regarding concerns that have surfaced as this area of practice has been infused into the current social work curriculum.

A variety of response formats were used on the survey, including yes-no answers, three-point Likert-type scales (ranged from "very relevant" to "relevant" to "not very relevant" course content), and format options ("classroom course," "workshop," or "other"). In addition, the following identifying data were collected: name of the school or department, position of the respondent, and the types of programs of study offered ("undergraduate only," "graduate only," "both levels," and "continuing education programs for practitioners").

Since no previous survey had been conducted on this issue of curricular examination, the researcher's primary objective was to gather some initial data on the infusion of this practice content into social work education. This exploratory study could then identify some beginning findings on the incorporation of standardized measures into social work curricula and continuing education, so that future studies could expand the scope of this research.

Two forms of data analyses were used. Frequency distributions were determined for the first 16 questions, and content analysis was conducted for the last "comments" question, since over one third of the respondents provided extensive feedback on this question.

Results

The survey had a 52% return rate, with 298 out of the 565 programs (58.4% "undergraduate only," 8.4% "graduate only," and 33.2% "both undergraduate and graduate") returning their forms after the initial mailing. Almost all geographic areas of the country were represented, with the responding programs covering 47 states, including Puerto Rico. The majority of the surveys (64.9%) were completed by the dean or chair of the responding social work program. Both academic levels of study were fairly well represented in the returns, although there was a higher percentage of "undergraduate only" programs (58.4%). That figure is similar to the proportion of "undergraduate only" programs (66%), compared to "graduate only" (19%) and "both levels" (15%) that are currently accredited. It is equally important to note that only a little over one third (37.3%) of the respondents are from programs that offer continuing education workshops on any regular basis.

Question One: Are standardized measures being integrated into BSW, MSW, or continuing education curricula?

Thirty-four percent of the responding programs have integrated content on standardized measures through separate courses. However, only 8.5% of the respondents have established continuing education programs on this area of practice. These data would seem to indicate some initial infusion of standardized measures into the social work education curricula.

Question Two: What is the most ideal instructional format for addressing the use of standardized measures for social work practice?

A higher percentage of respondents (48%) reported that the material should ideally be covered in a workshop format, while 40.3% noted that infusion into a current course would be the preferred format. Even though the workshop presentation was rated by a higher number of respondents as the ideal format, that figure was not significantly higher than the percentage of respondents who preferred presentation through course integration. It is interesting that only about one-fourth (26.1%) of the respondents plan to offer a separate course on this area of practice.

Respondents were also asked to report students' and practitioners' perceptions of the relevancy of this topic after they attended a separate course or workshop. Data from students who have taken a separate course on this area of practice showed that 91.9% viewed the material as "relevant" to "very relevant" to social work practice. Moreover, the practitioners' responses identified that 96.1% viewed the material as "relevant" to "very relevant" to social work practice. The high percentage of positive evaluation from both groups would seem to indicate that most of the survey respondents believe this area of practice is relevant for the field of social work.

Question Three: How important do social work educators believe this infusion of standardized measures is to the curricula?

Over one-third (36.9%) of the respondents noted that this area of practice is "very important" to the profession, with almost three-fourths (72.4%) having rated this topic as either "important" or "very important" to social work.

Question Four: What concerns have surfaced as this area of practice has been infused into the curricula?

The following seven themes surfaced through content analysis:

1. Current social work curriculum is "too full" to infuse this material.
2. The majority of field instructors require training on this area of practice, and faculty do not have the time to offer this type of continuing education.
3. Some field settings do not support social workers' use of standardized measures.
4. Some faculty members and field instructors do not feel that standardized scales should be part of social work practice.
5. The professional literature contains very little guidance on how to effectively address and teach this material.

6. Almost half of the respondents (42%) indicated that this area of practice is more appropriate and relevant for the MSW curricula rather than the BSW curricula.
7. The majority of the respondents (62%) indicated that this material is best addressed or taught when infused into existing courses.

Over one-third of the respondents (108 out of the 298) completed this part of the survey with fairly extensive and interesting feedback. This may indicate that the issue of integrating standardized measures has been discussed in many social work education programs. This finding could also indicate that faculty members are struggling to determine how to best teach this relatively new area of practice.

Almost one-fourth of the total respondent sample (68 out of the 298 respondents) reported that their programs infuse this topic into existing courses, with 39 in research methods, 32 in practice courses, three in program evaluation and management courses, one in a research seminar course, and three in field seminars. These latter figures are particularly important to social work education, since they establish some beginning data on how this material is being currently infused into core courses in the curricula. Respondents from four programs reported that they cover the topic in workshops for field instructors, and one program noted a separate elective course offered to students.

Discussion

This exploratory study was the first of its kind to examine if, how, and to what degree, content on standardized measures for social work practice is currently being infused into BSW, MSW, and continuing education curricula. The study brought out important findings and implications for social work education, and for future study. An analysis of the collected survey data is discussed below.

Question One: Are standardized measures being integrated into BSW, MSW, or continuing education curricula?

The collected survey data appear to indicate that social work education programs have started to address this area of practice. Over one-third of the respondents (34%) reported that they offer a separate course on the topic, and over half (62%) of the respondents, who made comments on the last survey question, noted that they are infusing content on standardized measures into current courses. One weakness of the study was that the respondents were not specifically asked if they infuse the topic into a required course. As a result, it is not known how many of the total responding programs infuse this area of practice into current courses. Further study of this infusion status is necessary in order to obtain more complete data on the number of social work education programs that incorporate this area of practice into their current courses.

Question Two: What is the most ideal instructional format for addressing the use of standardized measures for social work practice?

The most common formats used were separate continuing education workshops and infusion into the current courses. The data also indicated that 73.9% of the responding programs do not plan to offer a separate course on this topic. A slightly higher number (48%) of respondents preferred continuing education, as compared to infusion in required courses (40.3%) for ideal instructional formats. This finding may have been related more to the practical curriculum concerns that social work education programs face today. One concern frequently listed under the last survey question was "the current curriculum is 'too full' to add another topic." The preferred instructional format research question needs to be explored further, since it would be beneficial to know what the ideal instructional format is versus the most practical instructional format.

Several respondents (under the "additional concerns" question) provided the types of courses this material is being infused into as part of the required curriculum. The two most common courses identified were research and practice courses. This will hopefully point educators to some ways

of infusing this content area into current course offerings. A related finding, 42% of the respondents that completed this last survey question noted that they believe this area of practice material is more relevant for MSW curricula than BSW curricula. This latter finding warrants further study since it would be important to know how many of the current social work education programs share this opinion and their reasoning behind this opinion. The fact that the majority favor MSW programs as the point of infusion appears inconsistent with the full integration of standardized measures into social work practice.

Question Three: How important do social work educators believe this infusion of standardized measures is to the curricula?

The findings indicate that 72.4% of the respondents believe that the use of standardized measures is "important" to "very important" to the field of social work. Other data that supported this finding were the positive evaluations of the relevancy of the topic in courses (91.9% believed it to be "relevant" to "very relevant") and in continuing education (96.1% believed it to be "relevant" to "very relevant"). These results would seem to indicate that social work education programs consider the infusion of this area of practice to be important, and the topic is very well received by both students and practitioners alike.

Question Four: What concerns have surfaced as this area of practice has been infused into the curricula?

This research question yielded some of the most interesting and practical information for social work education and social service agencies. The issue "the curriculum is 'too full' due to current requirements" may require that programs think more carefully and creatively as to how they can effectively address this topic. Also, several respondents noted that interns encounter a common problem: field settings do not support their use of standardized measures. Working in collaboration with the field setting administrators, social work education programs need to carefully assess the following: the field instructors' knowledge and skills in using standardized measures; opportunities for students to complete assignments in the field using standardized measures; administrative policy around the use of standardized measures by social work staff and their interns; and resources within the university or social service organization to provide continuing education to field instructors on this topic. Another issue that this survey question revealed was that some field instructors do not agree with the use of standardized measures by social workers. This difference of philosophy should be directly addressed between social work practitioners and educators.

Summary and Implications

Social work administrators and managers know that treatment outcome evaluation, cost effectiveness, validation of subjective diagnosis, multiple assessment measures, quantitative as well as qualitative proof of program success, and corroborative evidence that supports treatment planning of more complex cases have become essential requirements for the functioning and survival of social service programs. The current and pressing accountability reality mandates that social work integrate more quantitative interventions, like standardized measures, with the field's more traditional services. It is in the profession's best interest to be proactive in response to these demands so that these new interventions can be utilized within social work's ecosystems approach to assessment, treatment, and evaluation. Therefore, the profession must do more than just endorse and recommend the use of such interventions as standardized measures. Social work educators, social service managers and administrators, and practitioners must work together to carefully plan ways to train both students and seasoned social workers on the use of standardized measures. Only through such planned instruction, in both the academic and agency setting, can practitioners fully integrate more objective assessment

measures, like standardized scales, into their daily work with clients.

This study's examination of the infusion of standardized measures for social work practice in the current BSW, MSW, and continuing education curricula brought forth some important beginning data on this issue. At the same time, this research identified salient social work education issues that need further study. How many of the current social work education programs are infusing this topic into required courses? How can the concerns around some field placements' lack of support in this area of practice be addressed? How can practitioners, who often serve as field instructors, become more knowledgeable and skilled at using standardized measures? Even though this study may have raised as many questions as answers, the data have established at least an initial awareness of how this area of practice is being integrated into social work education curricula.

Although this research focused on the initial training of social workers as they enter the field, future studies should investigate the actual integration of standardized measures into social work practice by the more experienced practitioner. For example, it will be important to know to what degree practitioners are using standardized measures, as well as the importance they assign to such interventions. With regards to the best formats for training practitioners on this area of practice, the practice literature appears to indicate that single session workshops are quite effective for the more seasoned social worker (Doueck & Kasper, 1990). Furthermore, are there ways social work education programs and social service agencies could collaborate on these training needs, so both students and practitioners can learn as team members?

Social service agencies and social work education programs must continually update and modify their training to keep up with the ever-changing demands and relevant needs of the field. It is imperative that training examination surveys like this one be conducted to determine whether such updates are occurring, to what degree, and how the profession can effectively teach new areas of practice to both students and practitioners. This survey identified some informative data regarding the infusion of standardized measures into social work education. However, there is clearly a need to study this issue further so that the field of social work can truly prepare students and train practitioners on the use of standardized measures, a critical skill in today's accountability-driven world. Research and subsequent training on this area of practice will ensure that the social work profession stays in parity with other helping professions.

References

Allen-Meares, P., & Lane. B. (1987). Grounding social work practice in theory: Ecosystems. *Casework, 68*, 515-521.

Balassone, M. (1991). A research methodology for the development of risk assessment tools in social work practice. *Social Work Research & Abstracts, 27(2)*, 16-23.

Bloom, M., Fischer, J., & Orme, J. (1999). *Evaluating practice: Guidelines for the accountable professional.* (3d ed.) Needham, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Blythe, B., & Tripodi, T. (1989). *Measurement in direct practice.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Doueck, H. J., & Kasper, B.(1990). Teaching practice evaluation to field instructors: A comparative study. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 4(2)*, 105-125.

Fillit, H. (1994). Making geriatric assessment an asset to your primary care practice. *Geriatrics, 49(1)*, 27-32.

Franklin, C., Nowicki, J., Trappp, J., Schwab, A. J., & Peterson, J. (1993). A computerized assessment system for brief, crisis-oriented youth services. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 74(10)*,602-616.

Gabor, P., Unrau, Y., & Grinnell, R. (1998). *Evaluation of social workers: A quality improvement approach for the social services.* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Gerdes, K. E., Edmonds, R. M., Haslam, D. R., & McCartney, T. L. (1996). A statewide survey of licensed clinical social workers' use of practice evaluation procedures. *Research on Social Work Practice, 6(1)*, 27-39.

Ginsberg, L. (2000). *Social work evaluation.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Hudson, W., & McMurtry, S. (1997). Comprehensive assessment in social work practice: The Multi-Problems Screening Inventory. *Research on Social Work Practice, 7(1)*, 79-98.

Jordon, C., & Franklin, C. (1992). Teaching students to perform assessment. *Journal of Social Work in Education, 28(2)*, 222-241.

Jordon, C., & Franklin, C. (1995). *Clinical assessment for social workers.* Chicago: Lyceum Books.

Jordon, C., Franklin, C., & Corcoran, (1997). Measuring instrument. In R. M. Grinnell, Jr. (Ed.), *Social work research and evaluation: Quantitative and qualitative approaches* (5th ed., pp. 184-211). Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers.

Mattaini, M., & Kirk, S. (1991). Assessing assessment in social work. *Social Work, 36(3)*, 260-266.

Nugent, W. R., Sieppert, J. D., & Hudson, W. W. (2001). *Practice evaluation for the 21st century.* Belmont, CA: Wadworth/Thomson Learning.

Nurius, P., & Hudson, W. (1993). *Human services: Practice evaluation and computers.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole.

O'Hare, T. (1991). Integrating research and practice: A framework for implementation. *Social Work, 36(3)*, 220-223.

Royse, D. & Thyer, B. (2000). *Program evaluation: An introduction.* (3d ed.).Florence, KY: Thomson Learning.

Van Hook, M., Berkman, B., & Dunkle, R. (1996). Assessment tools for general health care settings: PRIME-MD, OARS, and SF-36. *Health and Social Work, 21(3)*, 230-235.