16.3: The uniqueness of the social work perspective on science

Learning Objectives

• Describe how social workers contribute to social science

I hope that through reading this textbook you understand how science and research support effective and ethical social work practice. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the question I hear the most in my research methods classes is “when I am going to use this information, as a social worker?” If I’ve done anything right, you can answer that question by now. While it’s important to understand why science is important to a social worker like you, it’s also important that you understand why you are important to science. Social workers, by the nature of their work and their ethical orientation, have a lot of knowledge and expertise to contribute to social science.

Social work research is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary. A social worker who wishes to understand how masculinity is impacting her adolescent male clients must become fluent in not only the social work literature on masculinity but also
the literature from gender studies, sociology, and psychology. The synthesis of the insights from various social science disciplines, each representing a part of the person-in-environment framework, is a hallmark of strong social work research. Social work, over time, established a substantial base of empirical and theoretical insights, represented in journals such as *Social Work* and *Social Service Review*. But its interdisciplinary roots remain. Given the recent direction in research and practice grant funding towards interdisciplinary projects, this is a significant strength.

Social workers are a pragmatic group. We use what is most useful to us in a given practice situation. This pragmatism also extends to the theories that social workers use. Social work education emphasizes theoretical fluency, or the ability to switch theoretical frames to understand the same situation in different ways. I spend a lot of time around economists, and they are quite wedded to rational choice theory. When an economist examines a public policy problem, their perspectives are based in a rational calculation of costs and benefits by individuals in the action situation—and that’s all. As social workers, we understand that as one of many different theoretical lenses through which to view a given situation. Each theory will lend itself to different testable propositions in quantitative research or jumping-off points for qualitative research. Because of this, social workers can see beyond disciplinary and theoretical blinders to produce a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon.

In addition to incorporating multiple theories, social work is an explicitly multi-paradigmatic discipline. It acknowledges not only the methods and assumptions of the positivist paradigm, which is almost universally accepted in all social science disciplines, but also the social constructionist, critical, and postmodern paradigms. Social workers understand the limitations of the positivist paradigm and have created new ways of knowing to respond to the unquantifiable and context-dependent aspects of the human experience. Social workers can challenge social science that is deemed to be “universally true” for all people because it understands the complexity and diversity of human life.

Social work is a values-oriented profession. When social workers examine theories, research, or social problems, they do so with an orientation towards social justice, self-determination, strengths and capacities, and interdependence between all peoples. These values are a strength, as they help social workers interpret and analyze research findings in terms of fighting oppression. At the same time, social work is action-oriented. Not only do social workers think in terms of social change, but they seek to create that change themselves. Social workers always ask the “so what” question. That is, “so what does this mean for my client?”

**Key Takeaways**

- Social work contributes to social science through its orientation towards interdisciplinary knowledge, multiple theories and paradigms, and action on behalf of clients.

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