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Craig W. LeCroy  
*Arizona State University*

Jose B. Ashford  
*Arizona State University*

Mary Wirtz Macht  
*Macht and Associates - Oshkosh, Wisconsin*

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# A Framework for Analyzing Knowledge Utilization in Social Work Practice

CRAIG WINSTON LECROY

JOSÉ B. ASHFORD<sup>1</sup>

Arizona State University  
School of Social Work

MARY WIRTZ MACHT

Macht and Associates  
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

*Methodological and conceptual limitations have resulted in knowledge being defined so narrowly that we accept the inaccurate conclusion that social workers fail to utilize knowledge. This article seeks to rectify this problem by clarifying the concept of knowledge utilization in social work practice. Toward this end a framework is proposed that makes explicit the philosophy of science and practice assumptions germane to the use of knowledge in practice.*

In the last 10 years there has been much discussion of knowledge utilization and its impact on the profession (Brekke, 1986; Heineman, 1985; 1983; Hudson, 1982; Schuerman, 1982). The pivotal question in these discussions has been: do social workers use knowledge in their practice? However, these discussions have ignored the assumptions underlying rival perspectives on knowledge and on practice. In addition, the profession has lacked appropriate conceptual tools for integrating perspectives of knowledge with perspectives of practice. Furthermore, the philosophical underpinnings of the different conceptualizations of knowledge and practice in social work have not been examined in a systematic fashion. This situation is surprising since social work has always had a long standing commitment to knowledge-guided practice (Gordon, 1962).

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The advancement of the profession will be limited until social workers value and use knowledge in their practice (Gordon, 1962; Reid & Smith, 1981). Since the utilization of knowledge is essential to the professionalization of social work, it is important that we understand how social workers use knowledge in practice (Ashford & LeCroy, 1988). This understanding is not easily achieved because of different philosophical views of what constitutes knowledge. Indeed, an understanding of knowledge must take place within the context of practice, but social workers adhere to diverse conceptualizations of practice.

The purpose of this article is to clarify existing conceptualizations of knowledge utilization in social work practice. Knowledge utilization is currently conceptualized in too narrow of a fashion which has resulted in a lack of clarity regarding the extent of knowledge used in practice. In order to rectify this problem, a framework is described which is designed to organize the complex assumptions underlying the use of knowledge in social work practice. The framework provides a mechanism for critically analyzing competing perspectives of knowledge and practice in social work.

### Past Studies

Perhaps the most cited study of knowledge use in social work practice is the 1968 study by Rosenblatt (1968). He argued that research findings are of critical importance to practitioners. Rosenblatt (1968, p. 53) states: "if research holds little or no value for practitioners, the activities of social work researchers lose much of their purpose, for social welfare research is essentially applied research: its primary purpose is to improve services." The results of his study indicated that practitioners rarely used findings from published research to inform their practice. Casselman (1972) followed up on Rosenblatt's inquiry and found similar results; practitioners are unlikely to read research articles. Using better research methodology, Kirk, Osmalov and Fischer (1976) pursued the topic further only to conclude on a similar note—social workers do little producing of research, consuming of research, or consulting of research.

The results of the prior studies have led many people to conclude that social workers are failing to uphold the profession's

commitment to use knowledge in practice. However, this conclusion subscribes to a narrow understanding of knowledge appropriate for practice. It equates research utilization with knowledge utilization. If we want to advance the profession by enhancing knowledge use we must recognize the complexities involved in integrating knowledge with practice. Marsh (1983, p. 2) comments on recent studies of research utilization pointing out that "they reveal a simplistic understanding of what research can provide the practitioner as well as what information the practitioner needs to make decisions in practice."

### Methodological Limitations

Most research has defined utilization in a narrow way giving the misleading conclusion that social workers fail to utilize research. The utilization of research or knowledge is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to measure. For example, Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980, p. 35) in studying the topic of research found that "its meaning is so unclear, its referents so foggy, that people who are asked to describe their use of research discuss vastly different behavior." Similarly, in examining knowledge utilization, Larsen (1980, p. 429) states "studies limited to a single indicator of utilization, and one which is action-based, measure one narrow dimension and may be expected to miss conceptual utilization entirely". When Caplan, Monison & Stambaugh (1985) studied research utilization, defined as the direct influence of research findings on programs or decisions, it was rare. However, when the concept of utilization was extended to include consideration of research-based concepts and generalizations in formulating questions, setting goals, and planning activities, it was found to be common. We must recognize that the decisions of social workers may be influenced by countervailing knowledge generated from experience or research and filtered down to practitioners.

Because research utilization has been measured in such a narrow manner, it is unclear as to how much *knowledge* utilization there is among social workers. Social workers may make knowledge-based decisions but may not remember the source of their knowledge or distinguish when they are relying on other means for decision making that would not be considered knowl-

edge-based. While the process of research utilization is being increasingly studied, it is the task of social work educators to begin inquiry into how research findings can be both more relevant and accessible to social work practice (Burkart, Holzner, & Fischer, 1979; Rein & White, 1977; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). Marsh (1980, p. 2) in discussing research and practice decision making, states a similar point about research utilization which she claims "has suffered from exaggerated claims of the value of research and from conceptually weak definitions of use." Indeed, it is important to recognize that utilization results will undoubtedly be a function of the way in which utilization is operationally defined. The conclusions that can be drawn are limited in light of the narrow definitions frequently used in utilization studies.

#### Conceptualizing Utilization in Social Work Practice

Most authors who support research utilization differentiate it from intuition or practice wisdom as if social work practice were based on either one or the other. However, we must ask the question, how do we come to know something. Perhaps we need a philosophy of science framework in order to improve our understanding of the use of knowledge in practice. Is scientifically-based practice predicated on the reading of research articles? Yet, practice wisdom and other forms of knowledge can be useful and necessary parts of social work practice (DeMartini & Whitbeck, 1986). In discussing practice wisdom, Bloom (1975, p. 66) highlights its importance, "I believe that the issue of systematic formulation of practice wisdom is one of the unrecognized critical issues of the helping professions. Vast numbers of individuals and agency innovations are effectively lost to others who might profit from this knowledge."

Indeed, practitioners come to know things other than from research—there are many ways of knowing, some better and some worse. Without this realization we are painting an unrealistic and misdirected picture of what social work practice is and can become. Furthermore, if we posit increased *research* utilization as a desired goal what measure do we use to determine a reasonable level of research utilization? Is it reading three research articles a day? Two a week? Or five a month? What exactly does the knowledge-based, research-utilizing social

worker look like? Until we have some idea of our goal, it is difficult to assess any progress in that direction. Failure to read research studies does not necessarily point to the demise of the knowledge base of social work. Knowledge is transferred in numerous ways. In fact, practitioners may well be using knowledge-guided or research-based interventions without having read research articles.

Referring to only scientific research as usable knowledge creates a perceived gap between practice and knowledge which may not necessarily exist. We cannot have a scientific conclusiveness outside of "ordinary knowledge" (Emmert, 1985), or in the case of social work, practice wisdom. If we recognize a continuum of knowledge available for informing social work practice then the strain between these two activities becomes weakened. This does not detract from the goal of social work to create scientifically valid knowledge but places this goal within the context of refining current practice theory. Writings on research utilization make too sharp a distinction between practice wisdom and research-based decision making. As Thomas (1978) points out, there are a variety of sources of basic information useful for the process of developing human service technology. These sources range from basic research to practice experience.

In a similar manner, Chambers (1975) argues that social science is inadequate and a poverty-stricken body of knowledge. He believes we must recognize how incomplete science is and that we have only this poverty-stricken body of knowledge from which to work. He states "scientific knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient knowledge base for deriving practice behaviors. Science is incomplete and practitioners will be without a guide to action in many instances" (Chambers, 1975, p. 38).

The conceptual and the methodological limitations attributed to the research utilization literature in the prior sections of this paper suggest that researchers need to broaden their conceptualizations of knowledge-guided practice. In addition, it is argued that many researchers need to forego adhering to overly simplistic constructions of professional practice. Towards this end, a framework is described which is designed to organize complex assumptions underlying the issue of knowledge usage in social work practice.

### Framework For Evaluating Assumptions in Knowledge and Practice

A framework is presented which assumes that any perspective on knowledge utilization is based on a philosophy of science and a theory of practice. This framework identifies two dimensions relevant to understanding knowledge usage in social work practice: subjective-objective and problem solver-scientist. These dimensions incorporate a range of philosophy of science and practice assumptions underlying existing perspectives on knowledge utilization. The subjective-objective dimension conveniently collapses the range of philosophy of science assumptions into three sets of fundamental assumptions (ontological, epistemological, methodological) presented in the form of polarities. In a similar manner, the problem solver-scientist dimension is collapsed into three sets of fundamental assumptions (method, state of knowledge, expertise) also presented in the form of polarities (See Figure 1).

The two dimensions in the framework define four quadrants for evaluating knowledge in practice: subjective problem solver, objective problem solver, subjective scientist, and objective scientist (See Figure 1). Each of these quadrants describe approaches to knowledge usage based on different philosophy of science and practice assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In essence, a framework is presented that organizes competing assumptions about knowledge and practice in social work.

#### *The Subjective-Objective Dimension*

The first set of assumptions incorporated in the subjective-objective dimension address the perennial debates in the social and the behavioral sciences surrounding reality and its measurement. In fact, these assumptions are of an ontological nature and apply to the very essence of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Embedded in most ontological disputes is the controversy between Nominalist and Realist perspectives of reality. A nominalist perspective assumes that social reality is not independent of cognition or of mind. That is, the external world is nothing more than the names or the labels used to structure that social reality. Whereas the realist perspective assumes that there is an external social world or reality





truth, confirmation is based on the intersubjective processes of consensual validation. In copy theories of truth, confirmation is established on the basis of empirical validation (Smith, 1983). In practice situations, heuristics or rules of thumb derived from consensual validation are highly consistent with correspondence theories of truth; whereas data-based generalizations are tantamount to that of a copy theory of truth.

The second set of assumptions germane to this dimension are of an epistemological nature. This set of assumptions confronts the controversy between anti-positivism and positivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In a positivistic epistemology, it is assumed that the duty of a researcher is either to discover regularities in reality or to test the validity of hypothesized regularities. In fact, a central assumption in this epistemological perspective is that there are regularities in reality. As a consequence, knowledge is viewed in this epistemology as data-based generalizations. The function served by these generalizations is to either predict or explain some facet of human activity. On the other hand, an anti-positivist epistemology assumes that there are no regularities in social realities and as a result researchers should not seek to identify them. In this epistemological perspective, the goal of the social sciences is to understand (*verstehen*) rather than to explain or to predict human activity.

A dimension that is closely associated with ontological and epistemological assumptions is that of methodology. In this framework, the methodological set of assumptions reflect the major polarities in the field of methodology between ideographic and nomothetic approaches (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The ideographic approach places the focus of scientific inquiry on the individual. In addition, this approach stresses either explaining or understanding the individual (depending on one's epistemological assumptions) rather than either the general or the universal. It is also important to note that practice methods may also adhere to similar assumptions which are often ignored by researchers in their evaluatory efforts. Lastly, it is assumed in the nomothetic approach that researchers should seek to explain or understand the general. As a consequence, the major focus in a nomothetic approach is on making representative generalizations.

*The Problem-Solver-Scientist Dimension*

The problem solver-scientist dimension in this framework has assumptions that are consistently ignored by researchers involved in the study of knowledge utilization in social work practice. The first set of assumptions relates to the long-standing method controversy (LeCroy, Ashford & Hudson, 1986) in social work practice. In this debate, practice is predicated on assumptions derived from either the pragmatic method or the scientific method (Compton & Galaway, 1979). In the pragmatic method, it is assumed that knowledge is best conceived of as an activity. That is, knowledge is not conceived in this method as concepts or ideas; instead, knowledge is defined as any activity which results in consequences that resolve problems in living. Beyond that, it is not assumed in this method that knowledge is a fixed substance or a static set of concepts. Instead, it is assumed in this practice method that social workers should not take for granted that what "works" in one situation (which is considered truth in the philosophy of pragmatism) will also "work" in other situations (Stumpf, 1966). In essence, it is posited in this practice method that social work is a process without fixed or verified solutions to problems. On the other hand, it is assumed in approaches to practice based on the scientific method that there are verified solutions to problem situations and that it is the professional responsibility of social work practitioners to seek verified solutions.

The second set of assumptions in the problem solver-scientist dimension involve state-of-knowledge concerns. In a sense, these assumptions refer to the qualitative characteristics of the knowledge available to decision-makers in problem situations. These qualitative characteristics are conceptualized in this framework as a continuum which moves from uncertainty to certainty. The mid-point in this knowledge continuum is that of risk. These levels of knowledge are defined by Geurts, Hart & Caplan (1985, p. 337) as follows:

1. Certainty: all relevant variables regarding a problem and the relationships among them are considered known.
2. Risk: all relevant variables regarding a problem are considered to be known but their relationships can only be estimated.

3. **Uncertainty:** all relevant variables regarding a problem are considered to be known but some cannot be measured and the relationships among others are unknown.

Another issue that is closely associated with state of knowledge assumptions is that of practice expertise: inductive versus deductive expertise. In a closed system, it is appropriate to assume that the situation is certain and that practitioners make decisions and predictions based on principles from deductive reasoning. These deductive reasoning assumptions are associated with what might be termed a deductive model of practice expertise. In such a model, practitioners begin with verified axioms or theories from which specific predictions about behavior or about interventive strategies are derived. Alternatively, practitioners make predictions and decisions in open systems based on an inductive model of practice expertise. In this model, it is assumed that practitioners make their predictions in situations of risk or in situations of uncertainty. As a consequence, they adhere closely to principles from inductive modes of reasoning. That is, they generally use systematically gathered observations, coupled with relevant contingencies inferred from their experience and their training, to make their predictions (Helmer & Rescher, 1959).

#### *Four Quadrants For Evaluating Knowledge in Practice*

The four quadrants in the framework are labeled subjective problem solver, objective problem solver, subjective scientist and objective scientist (See Figure 1). These labels categorize forms of knowledge and styles of information usage in the practice of social work. Each of these quadrants also incorporates different philosophy of science and practice assumptions.

The subjective problem solver quadrant represents a label that describes information used to solve problems in practice that have not been subjected to scientific verification. In fact, intuition, phenomenological reduction, and consensual modes of agreement are typically the procedures used in developing knowledge for this quadrant. It is also assumed in this quadrant that knowledge cannot be generalized to other individuals or situations. The need for generalizations is more characteristic of the subjective scientist label. The subjective scientist seeks to

generalize across persons and situations by systematically observing subjective phenomena. They often employ single subject observations to make sense of subjective or private (introspective) phenomena as well as test the validity of theoretical hypotheses germane to subjective phenomena (Rychlak, 1981). For example, single subject observations can measure internal processes like subjective feelings or cognitive processes. Single subject observations that measure external phenomena are more characteristic of the objective scientist. The range of scientific method assumptions are integrated within each scientific approach to knowledge usage. That is, it is important to recognize that the subjective scientist may use either ideographic or nomothetic methods to study introspective phenomena. In summary, the framework seeks to make an important distinction between the subjective scientist and objective scientist quadrants because they each have different perspectives on appropriate data sources, i.e., internal versus external.

The objective problem solver quadrant includes knowledge based on observable experience that is subjected to inductive reasoning processes and the pragmatic method. This quadrant includes practice wisdom and practice principles derived from observable experience. This observable experience is validated by appealing to rational processes (reflective reasoning) rather than to the scientific method. The objective scientist relies on observable experience that is subjected to deductive reasoning processes and the scientific method, i.e., ideographic or nomothetic. Data and theory-based generalizations are common forms of knowledge found in this quadrant. Lastly, the objective scientist presumes that theoretical abstractions can be made that are generalizable and verifiable.

To clarify the distinctions between the quadrants consider the following practice situation: a practitioner is working with a family that has been referred because of difficulties with their teenage child. The subjective problem solver might make the decision to confront the father with his lack of involvement. The practitioner makes this decision on the basis of an internal feeling about the family at that moment. The form of knowledge directing the intervention is based on an intuition stimulated by the encounter with the family. The subjective scientist may make

a similar decision, however, the decision may be based on either repeated observations of the individual disclosures of the father or theoretical constructs. For example, the use of repeated observations enables the practitioner to make generalizations consistent with inductive scientific principles and single system technology. On the other hand, verified knowledge about disclosures of disengaged families may direct another subjective scientist to confront the father and the child to share their experiences with each other. This subjective scientist is guided by deductive reasoning and employs theory to direct the intervention; whereas the first subjective scientist is guided by data obtained from systematic observations of the family system and inductive reasoning. The objective problem solver may observe that every time the father was confronted about his lack of involvement he expressed more feelings toward the child. The practitioner infers after observing the consequences of confronting the father that confrontation may be a successful strategy for helping this father pay attention to his teenaged child. This approach is consistent with objective problem solving since the emphasis is on making inductive inferences from successful experiences that achieve desired consequences. The objective scientist observes the family's interaction and classifies the family according to its high rate of negative reciprocity. Upon making this observation the practitioner decides to have the members agree to exchange high rates of positive interactions. This decision is based upon a nomothetic research generalization that suggests *quid pro quo* exchanges can have a positive impact on negative reciprocity. The quadrants and dimensions in this framework are a beginning attempt to understand a continuum of knowledge and of practice underlying various perspectives on knowledge utilization.

Unless we understand fully the concept of knowledge utilization, evaluations of knowledge use by social workers will remain narrow and misleading. This framework emphasizes the differences between types of knowledge used and various conceptualizations of social work practice. It can be an aid to educators in evaluating the meta-theoretical and meta-philosophical assumptions underlying practice and explanatory theories. By using the two dimensions in this framework, educators can also

classify types of knowledge used in practice. Furthermore, the use of the framework makes explicit philosophy of science and practice assumptions previously ignored in efforts to understand knowledge utilization in social work practice.

Difficult distinctions were made for the purpose of putting knowledge use into a continuum. For example, data-based generalizations were assigned to the subjective scientist and objective scientist quadrants to take into account different methods (ideographic and nomothetic), however, it is also appropriate to assign data-based generalizations to the objective problem solver and objective scientist quadrants based on different reasoning processes (inductive and deductive thinking). The value of this framework is that it offers two dimensions (subjective-objective and problem solver-scientist) that allows for a more critical analysis of knowledge and practice than currently exists in the profession.

### Summary

Specific issues have been presented in order to reassess the relationship between social work practice and knowledge utilization. An examination of utilization concepts and activities has highlighted the difficulties in evaluating the profession's progress toward utilizing knowledge in social work practice.

The social work profession is struggling with different notions concerning the nature of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge is utilized (See, e.g., Brekke, 1986; Heineman, 1985; Hudson, 1982; Schuerman, 1982). These conflicts are grounded in epistemological as well as normative and conceptual differences. Many researchers have a hard time conceptualizing the ways in which professional social workers use "knowledge" in practicing social work. It is only considered knowledge when it conforms to familiar conceptualizations. The dilemma in defining knowledge is summarized by Benne (1976, p. 167): "western epistemologists, working for the most part, in modern times, in universities, have not drawn their models of valid "knowing" from the methods and products of thinking men and women of action who guide, direct, and conceptualize the practical "makings" and "doings" of culture and society".

In order to recast knowledge utilization, taking into consid-

eration epistemological and practice differences, a framework was presented. It provides a mechanism for evaluating various ways of knowing from pragmatic practice wisdom to scientific research generalizations. It should also enable practitioners and researchers to organize widely held conceptualizations of knowledge and practice. Only if we grapple with the complexities of knowledge and practice can we make progress toward our societal mandate, a profession guided by knowledge.

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