Research on Social Work Practice

Book Reviews: Essential Skills of Social Work Practice: Assessment, Intervention, and Evaluation

Katherine Luke and Brian Perron

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

⑤SAGE

Additional services and information for *Research on Social Work Practice* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://rsw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://rsw.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Book Reviews

O'Hare, T. (2009). *Essential Skills of Social Work Practice: Assessment, Intervention, and Evaluation*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books, Inc. 399 pp., $49.95, paperback, IBSN 978-0-933478-50-0.

This comprehensive and ambitious text successfully provides an accessible, thorough, and thoughtful treatment of the essential skills necessary for fundamental social work practice. This book is very well organized, with an exceptional clarity of purpose and consistency throughout presentation of information. It is divided into three parts, taking the reader through the conceptual foundation for the essential skills, to a discussion of the skills themselves, and concluding with how the skills are or could be applied in practice. It answers fundamental questions often posed in social work education—"Why is this important?" and "How can I use this knowledge in practice?" As such, it is very appropriate for master of social work (MSW) and bachelor of social work (BSW) students in foundation classes, as well as more experienced practitioners who wish to improve and/or modify their own practice.

Part 1: Conceptual Foundations of Essential Social Work Practice Skills

The author begins this book with a very brief overview of what assessment, intervention, and evaluation are within social work practice. This is followed by a brief yet thorough discussion of the major human behavior and practice theories and the value of practice research to evaluating the usefulness of those theories for effective intervention. One of the greatest strengths of the social work profession is the ability to critically evaluate and skillfully apply tools from wide range of theories and disciplines for the best interests of clients. The author exemplifies this pragmatic approach to intervention and encourages readers to combine the useful aspects of different practice theories and research without commitment to one's own preferences or ideology. This, he argues, is what practice research allows us to do. The author concludes the first chapter with a brief discussion of applying the combination of essential skills of social work practice in a variety of contexts, foreshadowing the rest of the book.

The second chapter builds on the theme of research-informed practice. It provides a basic explanation of how research on practice is and can be done, as well as the value of developing and improving practice through research. This chapter emphasizes the importance of critical thinking skills for effective social work practice. Critical thinking allows practitioners to choose between possible interventions that might be best for a client, to be open to new and different ideas as opposed to being bound to a specific ideology, and to balance practice-based wisdom with current research. This chapter will be particularly useful for students and practitioners who are hesitant to accept the value of research to their own practice.

Ethics are the focus of the third chapter. Specifically, the essential ethics for social work practice, drawing on the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics are discussed in the context of real-world ethical dilemmas. One valuable addition to the standard discussion of ethics is acknowledgment that determining the best course of treatment is a process that involves ethics. Knowledge of practice research is an essential ethical value of effective social work practice as such knowledge is and should be used in planning interventions.

Part 2: Essential Practice Skills

In this section, the essential skills of social work practice are discussed, including the core skills, their importance, and how they are applied. As with the book in general, this section is very clearly written and the information is both well organized and accessible.

Chapter 4 focuses on assessment and evaluation skills. This involves a step-by-step overview of a multidimensional functional assessment, including where and how to obtain data. Excellent examples of scenarios social work practitioners are likely to face are used throughout this discussion. The author emphasizes that a primary purpose of assessment is to inform the selection of the best and most effective intervention, tailored to the clients' specific situations. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of why and how to evaluate one's own practice.

Supportive skills are discussed in chapter 5, with an emphasis on essential skills for developing client-centered relationships. The author walks the reader through the basics of interviewing, offering examples of asking introductory and follow-up questions, using and reading nonverbal communication, and encouraging clients to participate in their treatment planning.

Following the theme of engagement, chapter 6 addresses "therapeutic coping." Therapeutic coping is a practice grounded in cognitive behavioral treatment that helps clients learn to critically evaluate their thinking (cognition) and incorporate skills to improve their own coping and problem-solving (behavior). It is a practice that builds on supportive skills and is a template for tailoring interventions. This chapter describes the essential skills to encourage cognitive change and improve capacity for change (e.g., thinking, feeling, and behaving). Strong emphasis is placed on individualized treatment planning and client participation in treatment planning.

Chapter 7 focuses on case management skills that are necessary for developing effective comprehensive treatment plans. Case management skills include identifying and accessing necessary material resources, advocating for fair treatment, making appropriate referrals, brokering, and translating between different service systems. These skills are particularly essential when clients and their families are involved in multiple service systems, for example, those clients who are experiencing child abuse and neglect or severe and persistent mental illness. Case management recognizes the multidimensionality of need—and the multiple sources of support potentially available for clients. This chapter provides readers with an explanation of what such skills are and how to implement them in practice.

Part 3: Applying Combinations of Essential Skills With Individuals, Couples, Children, and Their Families

Chapters in this section discuss assessment and intervention skills that research has shown to be essential for addressing social work's most pressing concerns. Chapters 8 through 10 deal with issues facing adults. Schizophrenia, mood and anxiety disorders are covered in chapter 8, substance abuse and personality disorders (specifically antisocial and borderline personality disorders) are addressed in chapter 9, and couple conflict is the focus of chapter 10. The remaining chapters, 11 and 12, focus on issues common among children and adolescents. Internalizing disorders (specifically anxiety and depression) are discussed in chapter 11 and externalizing disorders (including behavioral concerns such as conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder) are the focus of Chapter 12.

Each chapter begins with an overview of assessment and intervention for specific or co-occurring problems. Skills necessary for conducting effective assessments as well as planning and executing interventions are clearly and concretely discussed. Early career social workers will find the discussion useful for guiding practice, and seasoned social workers will find it useful as a self-evaluation tool. A strength of the chapters are the case studies, which provide detailed examples of how to use essential skills taught in this text and how to implement a comprehensive service plan. The author's choice to include case studies featuring clients of diverse cultural backgrounds show that cultural competence is inherent to effective social work practice. Finally, each chapter concludes with a detailed chart of the comprehensive service plan for that particular case study. This summary chart demonstrates how to present dense, complicated material into one brief summary of the essential information from the case study. It can also serve as a standalone document that social workers could use in their everyday practice.

The body of the text concludes with a chapter entitled *From Essential skills to Evidence Based Practice*. In this chapter, the author summarizes the importance of evidence-based practice (EBP) for social work and gives some context for the debate within the field around EBP. It is here, also, where the author reiterates the point that conducting EBP is rarely an introductory-level, or essential, skill of a social work practitioner. Thus, beginning BSW and MSW, practitioners should seek out specialized, focused training on a particular EBP before implementing it in their work with clients. The chapter encourages social work organizations and schools of social work to endorse EBP in both word and deed and provides a detailed explanation of how they could do so.

A final highlight of the book is its appendix. Appendix A is the psychosocial intervention scale that practitioners can use to evaluate their own practice. Appendix B is the comprehensive service plan in a brief form that could be copied and pulled out of a practitioner's office and into every client's file. These will both be very useful for practitioners at all stages of their practice career, perhaps particularly in the beginning as good habits of practice and evaluation of one's own practice are being routinized.

An unusual contribution of this book, and one that will be increasingly recognized as valuable as we move toward greater implementation of EBP throughout the field, is the guide to reading research reports found in Appendix C. *Research on Social Work Practice* will soon be offering continuing education units (CEUs) in conjunction with reading practice research articles. As this mechanism of obtaining CEUs becomes more common, and as the field continues to embrace (EBT), this guide to reading research reports will become an invaluable tool for practitioners.

This impressive book effectively provides comprehensive information in a clear, easily digestible manner. We predict it will become a staple in foundation BSW and MSW courses, and perhaps in a range of human service courses. It is highly relevant and valuable for a wide social work student and practitioner audience. Our critiques are quite minor and would only be improvements on an already high-quality and high-value text. They include adding several documents to the appendix. As an introductory text, this book would benefit from a distinct glossary of terms. Many practice terms, which might be unfamiliar to some audiences, are used in the text. The book is also very "text heavy." Not inappropriately so, given the scope of what it covers. However, the book may be improved by adding more tables and charts that summarize key ideas for each section or chapter. The Comprehensive Service Plan summaries found at the end of chapters 8 through 12 are good examples of this. Similarly formatted summaries of practice research and practice theories, the relationship between research and practice, and the essential skills, for example, would be very useful. In thinking about using this book as a teaching text, these could serve as effective handouts for students. These suggestions, however, are quite minor and would only improve what already is a well written, comprehensive text on the essential social work practice skills.

Katherine P. Luke
Brian E. Perron

For reprints and permissions queries, please visit SAGE's Web site at http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav