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Teaching Students to Become Effective in Policy Practice: Integrating Social Capital into Social Work Education and Practice

Robin L. Ersing
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ABSTRACT. Social workers must integrate social capital more fully into social work policy practice. In order to do so, social work educators must recognize the complexities of social capital and must provide opportunities for students to learn about the utility of social capital within policy and practice realms. Since its inception, professional social work has used elements of social capital in interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Educators must recognize this and integrate social capital into the curriculum so that our students can effectively use social capital in policy practice.

KEYWORDS. Social capital, social work education, social justice

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The authors welcome comments and suggestions from interested individuals and are willing to share specific examples of how social capital has been integrated into policy and practice courses.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social capital has become widely accepted as an integral part of an effective poverty alleviation strategy and has been used to enhance social justice (Estes, 2003; Warren, Thompson & Saegert, 2002; Woolcock, 2000; World Bank, 2003). In light of this, social workers must integrate social capital more fully into social work policy practice. In order to do so, social work educators must recognize the complexities of social capital and must provide opportunities for students to learn about the utility of social capital within policy and practice realms. Since its inception, professional social work has used elements of social capital in interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. However, seldom are these interventions discussed in terms of social capital. If “people with good access to social capital tend to be more hired, housed, healthy and happy than those without” (Australian Productivity Commission, 2003, p. xi) then we must ensure that professional social workers understand and effectively use social capital in policy practice.

As social workers, our commitment to social justice requires that we embrace, understand, and use social capital to help overcome the widening inequitable social distribution of resources that continues to exclude many individuals, families, communities, and even nations from accessing opportunities and resources. This begins with teaching our students how to create and maximize social capital when advocating for policy change at local, state, national, and international levels.

Changes in social work practice begin with changes in social work education. As Healy and Hampshire (2003) remind us, “social capital is an important concept in public policy and debate and so it is vital that social workers have an understanding of its origins and implications” (p. 236). By providing our students with an understanding of social work’s historical relationship to social capital and by creating opportunities for our students to learn about social capital through experiences, we will enhance our ability, as a profession, to contribute to the growing body of knowledge related to social capital and to more fully participate in effective policy practice.

This article provides a brief definition and overview of social capital using the Loeffler, et al. (2004) framework to integrate social capital and social work practice. We then focus on how social work educators can further students’ abilities to utilize social capital in policy practice to enhance social justice.

DEFINING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital can be understood as an empowering process that promotes the building of trusting relationships across individuals, families, and communities to accumulate concrete resources aimed at improving one's quality of life and well-being. The deployment or leveraging of accumulated "capital" (i.e., the level of strength and trust inherent to the social relationships formed), reveals the value of the process according to the types and utility of resources obtained. Examples of such resources acquired through the social capital process of building strong relational ties might include access to new forms of knowledge and information, access to previously constrained economic opportunities, and the use of skills to cultivate additional new forms of financial and/or political capital. Capital typically refers to tangible things. Social capital, in contrast, is a *process*. Therefore, social capital generates access to other forms of capital. Trust, reciprocity, networks, social agency and shared norms all increase/enhance the development of social capital (Estes, 2003; Frank & Yasumoto, 1998; Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001; Loeffler et al., 2004).

Social capital has a rich theoretical and conceptual history that is beyond the scope of the current discussion (see Farr, 2004 and Woolcock, 1998). Rather, we focus on introducing elements of social capital that will allow educators to integrate social capital into the curriculum. Social capital is often delineated into three interrelated areas: bonding, bridging, and linking. These are closely aligned with the micro, mezzo, and macro areas of practice that are familiar within the generalist framework for social work education and practice (Loeffler et al., 2004). In discussing these interrelated areas, we assume interconnectedness and reciprocity among the three. Indeed, we contend that social capital is integral in accessing resources that are otherwise unavailable given structural and political barriers that block access to resources. Although multilayered, social capital can ultimately create and harness opportunities for connectivity, trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit for individuals, families, and communities.

Bonding, Bridging, and Linking

For a complete overview of how the social capital concepts of bonding, bridging, and linking are aligned with the micro, mezzo, and macro areas of social work practice, we refer the reader to Loeffler et al. 2004. However, a brief mention of the terms provides context for this discussion of social capital, social work education and policy practice.

Bonding social capital exists within the individual's capabilities to harness the resources that exist/occur within a given relationship. Interpersonal interactions that generate mutual trust, understanding, reciprocity, and shared norms are the building blocks of bonding social capital (Loeffler et al., 2004).

Bridging social capital connects formal and informal support networks. Involvement in faith communities, self-help organizations, and connection with professional peers can all help to generate bridges that provide access to resources such as physical, financial, political, or human capital. Oftentimes, bridging extends relationships across communities (Loeffler et al., 2004).

From a macro perspective, linking social capital focuses on accessing resources and capital from government agencies such as welfare agencies or housing authorities (Woolcock, 2000), access to local, state, and national politicians, and to public policy development. In creating linkages, social work professionals become engaged in social welfare policy and help in the improvement of access to and reallocation of resources and capital. (Loeffler et al., 2004).

Educating our future social work practitioners and policymakers about the interconnectedness between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital is warranted. Indeed, educating them about the interconnectedness between social capital and other forms of capital important in poverty alleviation (economic, financial, human, and cultural capital), is also necessary. The result is an opportunity to reframe discussions of oppression and injustice, creating new and viable solutions for the challenges that face social work practitioners in the twenty-first century.

SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The social work profession has a long history of embracing social capital as a core element in working with individuals, groups, and communities, though we rarely refer to what we are doing as "building social capital." Indeed, from the earliest days of the Settlement House Movement through the turbulent times of the War on Poverty, the building and strengthening of social ties within families and communities has been central to addressing issues of social justice and social reform (Carson, 1990; Elshtain, 2002; Fisher, 1994; Weil, 1996).

In the past two decades, however, the connection between social work and social capital has become less evident. The growing trend toward

clinical social work practice has left many social workers without necessary knowledge and tools to purposefully engage in policy practice, including the development and preservation of social capital. The Alliance for Children and Families (ACF) found that community-based agencies have trouble recruiting social workers to fill jobs in community-centered programs. Further, their study revealed that organizations interested in community practice have continually looked outside of social work to fill their employment gaps. Clergy and other professionals without social work education/credentials have been recruited to step into positions with community-based organizations that have traditionally been “social work jobs” (Ryan, DeMasi, Heinz, Jacobson, & Ohmer, 2000, p. 8). This is particularly noteworthy in the current century when the politics of “new federalism” and devolution have forced communities and individuals to redress socioeconomic disparities plaguing some of our most vulnerable populations who live in low-income communities across the nation.

Without the “social work” focus on community and coalition building, many of these communities and vulnerable populations face eroding social capital and increased alienation. The devolution of federal social welfare policies has shifted responsibility for the care of vulnerable populations to communities and individuals. Thus, individuals are more often reliant upon the support found within formal and informal community-based networks, including faith communities and extended family groups, pooling resources to attempt to mutually build their capacity to overcome these barriers to opportunity (Anderson & Eamon, 2004; Coulton, 1996, 2003; Newman, 1999). Whereas social capital helps to keep individuals and communities “hired, housed, healthy and happy . . . a lack of social capital may encumber daily life, limit social and economic opportunities, and cause markets to work less efficiently. Low social capital in depressed communities can reinforce existing inequalities” (Australian Productivity Commission, 2003, p. xi).

Embracing social capital and integrating it into our educational curricula will be of benefit to the profession—and the populations we serve—as we continue to struggle with the complexities and many faces of poverty and injustice in the twenty-first century. Further, social capital is being incorporated into social work education in other countries and, in a “shrinking world,” it is imperative that our students are aware of the concept and its utility both here and abroad. Duncan (1999) poignantly illustrates the impact of persistent class inequalities and weak economies that create little opportunity for moving out of poverty. Restricted opportunity to access capital *can* be overcome through the creation,

maintenance, and use of social capital. Low-income children and families are often tied to poor schools and other marginalized resources, which decrease access to opportunities that would “support their efforts to move beyond poverty” (Harris & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 5).

POLICY PRACTICE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

As social workers, we are charged with challenging social injustices through social change efforts (NASW, 1999). Further, we are charged with “ensur[ing] access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in the decision making for all people” (NASW, 1999, p. 5). By creating opportunities for oppressed and vulnerable populations to have a voice in the policy process, we begin to challenge policies and programs made in the absence of input from those most impacted by the programs and policies. Social workers can serve as the conduit that links populations and people to policymakers and to the decision-making process. By using our skills as advocates and organizers, we can empower vulnerable populations to have a voice in the policy-making process.

Too often, the elite make decisions that impact marginalized individuals and vulnerable communities in the absence of those who will be affected by policies, programs, and funding cuts. When marginalized populations have a voice in the decision-making processes that yield capital and access to power—or to those with power—and are able to create an opportunity for their needs to be met, they become effective agents of change within both their own household and the broader community. In creating linkages, social work professionals become engaged in social welfare policy and help in the improvement of access to and reallocation of resources and capital (Loeffler et al., 2004).

Social workers must be able to harness the potential of social capital to help build and re-build necessary social networks, programs, and financial resources to maintain programs that benefit the vulnerable populations with whom we work. At the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice, there are opportunities for social workers to engage in the development and maintenance of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. This capital, in turn, helps to create or further opportunities and access to resources and power for individuals, families, and communities. Too often policy practice becomes an adjunct to a social worker’s “primary” job responsibility. For example, a social worker engaged in

supporting victims of domestic violence may engage in day-to-day work as a broker, a counselor, and an educator, yet may also need to work on a broader level as an advocate and an agent of social change. A clinical social worker may engage primarily in counseling and related work but may also spend time working to lobby for parity in insurance coverage for mental health services. If each of these social workers were, as students, given an opportunity to understand how social capital can enhance policy practice, they would be better equipped to work toward advancing institutional and systemic change as well.

It is imperative that as educators we reintroduce our students to the powerful role that social capital can play in the development of social policy and in the fight for reallocation of resources and social justice. In doing so, we may also begin to revitalize students' interest in policy practice as more than an adjunct responsibility.

INTEGRATING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Teaching students about the concept, process, and utility of social capital in capacity building and creating social justice presents an exciting opportunity for social work educators. We already create opportunities for students to learn through traditional paths in social work education by focusing primarily on imparting knowledge, values, and skills necessary for effective work with client systems. This generally entails the use of dynamic role-plays and reflection on field practicum experiences to critically assess the application of skills used to enhance client functioning or to demonstrate the use of problem-solving processes to aid in managing a client situation. Through these experiences, students acquire necessary problem solving, interpersonal and communication skills that can assist them in all aspects of their professional lives.

To complement this education, we must think "outside of the box," taking students down a second path, one that holds the most promise for truly teaching about the power and utility of social capital in pursuit of social justice. In order to do this, we must first engage students in the process of developing their own social capital by providing opportunities for bridging and linking as they prepare to enter the realm of professional social work practice. Second, we must promote learning opportunities that enable students to see first-hand how vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities can benefit from enhanced social capital.

By facilitating the development of professional relationship building and networking (assisting students in developing their own social capital), we can help our students become more effective in their helping role with clients. Livermore and Neustrom (2003) found that social workers were reliant upon their own social capital in aiding TANF recipients in securing employment—illustrating the need for social work students to begin to develop the trusting relationships and norms of reciprocity that can be useful professionally. Ultimately, by helping students to engage in relationship building and networking, we assist them in understanding the ways that social capital can be leveraged to garner necessary resources to achieve their goals as helping professionals. Students begin to understand how social work professionals can increase their effectiveness in carrying out the role of broker if they have been successful in bonding with more experienced co-workers thus benefitting from their knowledge. Likewise, students who use their social capital developed through networking relationships are able to bridge with colleagues in other organizations to obtain services needed by a client system. This path of learning is a particularly important component for preparing students to become effective in policy advocacy efforts.

Assisting students in understanding the concept of social capital is a vital element in engaging in macro-level change. Students begin to learn the importance of linking mobilized communities with external institutions to pursue structural changes through policy initiatives and influencing decision makers. This experience will aid students in becoming more proficient in their future advocacy efforts to benefit clients and the profession.

Incorporating theoretical, historical, and practical knowledge about social capital helps to transcend the longstanding myth of the micro-macro dichotomy in professional social work practice. Instead, students will learn about social work's distinct approach to addressing social injustices, problems in daily living, and conditions that interfere with healthy human relationships through interventions at the individual, family, organizational, community, and societal levels. The process of social capital spans each level of intervention with the concepts of bonding (micro), bridging (mezzo), and linking (macro). Students should receive guidance in connecting the bonding process of social capital to micro-level practice that involves nurturing social ties within the family system (Coleman, 1988). At the mezzo level of practice, students can be taught about the mobilization of community-based resources and the building of strong social ties with neighbors and local organizations to enhance individual and family well-being (Altschuler, Somkin, & Adler, 2004). Similarly, lessons learned about the role of social capital at the

macro level will involve the concept of harnessing collective efficacy within communities and linking them to external institutions that engage in policy making.

Educators can draw from models of locality development, neighborhood and community organizing, and social and economic development to teach fundamental skills and worker roles (Rothman, 2001; Weil & Gamble, 1995). This will help students recognize the strength of social capital and relationships in removing barriers to opportunity structures to achieve justice through the equitable distribution of resources in our society.

Integrating a social capital perspective into policy and practice courses that teach about the often overlooked yet critical mezzo level of intervention serves an important dual purpose in preparing students as social workers. Here students come to understand the pivotal role workers play in successfully bridging the gaps between family or group needs, and the supports and resources available within the broader social and physical environment. Whether connecting families to school systems or grieving parents to mutual support groups, bridging social capital becomes central to mezzo-level work.

A second learning opportunity for social work students focuses on professional development and the need to acquire a personal cache of social capital. This asset can then be applied toward increasing effectiveness in traditional social work bridging roles (e.g., broker, facilitator, and organizer). The field setting is a prime context for educators to encourage students in building professional relationships with formal and informal supports throughout the community. Therefore we recognize that the same principles of trust and reciprocity become vital to professional success in alleviating social injustices that impact our client systems.

An interesting phenomenon often overlooked by faculty and administrators is the fact that students seem to employ social capital as a bridging strategy as they form study circles or project groups. In this regard, the development of social ties and trusting relationships serves as a natural support among peers hoping to achieve a greater success in the program. Likewise, instructors can encourage the building and bridging of social capital between students and formal institutions or informal associations by creating assignments that require interactions with these entities outside the classroom setting (e.g., service learning projects, participatory action research). For some, this subtle approach might suggest a culture shift on the part of administrators and faculty.

Although we teach our students how to use social capital in their work with clients to build both individual and community capacity, we must be

cognizant of the need to help students cultivate their own social capital resources as well. In doing so, it is helpful to think about bonding, bridging, and linking social capital as related to students' own self-efficacy, networking, and social justice, respectively. As students enhance their own skills, they will be better prepared to help client systems create, nurture, and sustain social capital that will enable positive social change. Likewise, the forethought by schools of social work to infuse a social capital perspective into the curriculum can reap additional benefits as students forge strong ties and links with the institution manifested through future roles as adjunct instructors, field educators, and recruitment ambassadors.

As educators, we help students create their own interpersonal relationships with their cohort and with –mentors, creating trusting, reciprocal relationships that can be used as a resource in practice (bonding). We create bridges for students so they can understand and access resources and services in the community, and we help students become advocates for social justice, providing linkages with government and institutions, providing platforms and opportunities for change. By creating opportunities for engaged learning, social work educators are able to transform policy and practice knowledge from the curriculum into active applications beyond the walls of the classroom. Opportunities such as interfacing with the state political process and creating social change in a low-income neighborhood, help students see firsthand the power of social capital while providing outlets and opportunities for personal capacity building, relationship building, and resource building. These skills will enable students to work more effectively within their own communities as professional social workers.

CONCLUSION

For social workers to remain involved in policy practice, we must acknowledge that the integration of social capital into community development and poverty alleviation is being used all around us and we must contribute to the knowledge and discussion related to social capital's viability as part of a social justice oriented antipoverty strategy. Social capital is already an integral part of international antipoverty efforts (Estes, 2003; Warren, Thompson & Saegert, 2002; Woolcock, 2000; World Bank, 2003) and social work needs to remain participatory in discussions and interventions that utilize social capital as we can offer a unique perspective

related to the complexities of the interface between the individual (or family) and the community. Within social work, social capital is generating interest. Recent works by Fram (2004), Dominguez and Watkins (2003), Coulton (2003), Livermore and Neustrom (2003) and Schneider (2002, 2006) discuss social capital as it relates to social work practice.

Schneider (2006) highlights the importance of social capital in the success of “welfare to work” programs, stressing that former welfare recipients often find jobs and opportunities because of their social capital. Further, she stresses that social welfare policies cannot work in an era of devolution unless formal connections exist between government agencies, private nonprofit organizations, and for-profit organizations. Walker (2004) discusses social capital in the role of social welfare policy and policy analysis in New Zealand, calling for “increased relationship building and networking between agencies—in an era of budget cuts and stretched resources” (p. 4). These examples suggest that social work is starting to embrace social capital, understanding its integral role in creating and maintaining effective social welfare policies and practices. As educators, we must now make the integration of social capital mainstream.

The concept of social capital and its relevance to social work policy practice continues to emerge through academic and scholarly outlets including textbooks (see Bruggeman, 2006; Karger & Stoesz, 2002; Schneider, 2006). Although several curriculum areas are ripe for infusing content on social capital, this article has focused on the infusion of social capital into the policy curriculum, emphasizing the ability of social capital to help create social change and to alleviate injustices and the inequitable distribution of resources and power. As social work educators, we must continue to work for social justice, and this can start by creating opportunities for teaching about social capital in the classroom and beyond. By doing so, we can help to reinforce social work’s commitment to social justice and, in turn, will help our students to become responsible practitioners who work to achieve greater equity in an unequal society through effective policy practice and advocacy.

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