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# Building Knowledge to Support Human Service Organizational and Management Practice: An Agenda to Address the Research-to-Practice Gap

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Leaders of human service organizations (HSOs) face significant pressures from policymakers and funders to justify practices and ensure successful outcomes, an issue that has implications for social work practitioners and evidence-informed management practice. Although empirical research has advanced understanding of the factors that improve human service effectiveness and organizational improvement, considerable research-to-practice gaps exist and the use and translation of knowledge into regular management practice remain limited. This article concerns how social work research can link human service organizational and management research to practice more robustly. Authors describe challenges that affect the ability of managers in HSOs to use research to inform practice. The analysis of these challenges supports a research capacity-building agenda focusing on (a) the identification and application of new methods of organization and management science, (b) the fostering of closer connections between researchers and practitioners, and (c) the provision of institutional and organizational resources for applied human services research. This macro-level agenda is designed to enhance practice-based research among schools of social work and leading HSOs, and also strengthen researcher-practitioner linkages, with the goal of promoting the advancement and utilization of research evidence in HSOs.

KEY WORDS: *academic-practitioner relationships; capacity building; human service organizations; management; social work research*

Research on human service organizations (HSOs) and managers has two central purposes: (1) to describe the contexts and contributions of HSOs, their managers, and staff and (2) to enhance management and staff practices, service effectiveness, and service user outcomes (Smith, 2018). This dual purpose emphasizes the importance of understanding the structures and processes within HSOs to improve organizational conditions and external impacts for stakeholders (Hasenfeld, 2010). In this field, empirical studies are intended to address the knowledge needs of managers and other practitioners, thereby contributing to the resolution of community and societal issues (Mosley & Smith, 2018). In furtherance of this goal, organization and management science has built a substantial research base in social work and related professions, including public administration, public policy, public health, and business.

Yet at a societal or macro level, the extent to which social work research informs practice among HSOs is far from clear. This article describes how

HSO research can be linked more robustly to management practice to build research capacity and use. Research suggests that HSOs where social workers generally practice lack access to or underuse different types of research, including the generic use of evidence regarding practice (Dill & Shera, 2015), the use of agency outcome data for impact evaluation and performance improvement (Kroll, 2015), and the use of research evidence in managerial decision making (Palinkas, Saldana, Chou, & Chamberlain, 2017). Other studies have found that few HSOs in prominent social work fields of practice—such as child welfare, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, including the allied health professions—use evidence-based practices despite growing demands to do so (Chuang, Collins-Camargo, & McBeath, 2017; Guerrero, He, Kim, & Aarons, 2014). Similarly, social work scholars have identified challenges to the development and support of research infrastructure pipelines within schools of social work (Guerrero, Moore & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2018), with HSOs, and with adjacent

professions and institutions (for example, medical schools and hospitals) (Howard & Garland, 2015; McDermott & Bawden, 2017; Orme & Powell, 2008).

Research capacity-building initiatives have also been proposed in other sectors. In the health sciences, research infrastructure development challenges have been identified in regard to public health, medicine, and nursing (Brownson, Fielding, & Green, 2018; Westwood, Richardson, Latter, Clark, & Fader, 2018). Similar efforts have been noted in adjacent professions including business, public administration, and public policy (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; Paton, Chia, & Burt, 2014). General emphases of these calls have included the need for financial and institutional supports from public and private research funding agencies; partnerships between educational institutions and industry organizations focused on basic and applied research questions, translational research, and knowledge dissemination; supports for doctoral education and research traineeships; and enhanced quantity and quality in peer-reviewed publications, research-to-practice partnerships, and bench-to-bedside innovations.

This research capacity-building topic is significant, considering the current tensions experienced by social workers and applied professionals working in HSO settings. These managerial tensions include (a) increased pressures to use research evidence and other information to advocate for service programs while demonstrating service effectiveness (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Meyer, Cohen-Callow, Hopkins, & Victorson, 2017; Mosley & Gibson, 2017); (b) challenges to implementing and sustaining evidence-based practices and best or promising practices (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2017); (c) little training and resources for evidence-informed management practice (Dill & SHERA, 2015; Graff, McBeath, & Austin, 2017); and (d) limited institutional resources for macro-practice education and agency-based research in schools of social work (McBeath, 2016).

Addressing these macro tensions is critical for social work researchers to identify grand strategies in response to the Grand Challenges for Social Work (Fong, Lubben, & Barth, 2018). In particular, the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work (n.d.-a) statements emphasize the societal need for novel strategies and research-to-practice partnerships that connect academic researchers and agency

leaders to respond to policy and practice issues. On a broad scale involving schools and departments of social work, HSOs, and federal and state policy institutions, these efforts require research-based advancements in the initiation and sustainment of innovative practices, programs, and policies within and across health and human service systems (Padilla & Fong, 2016). Similar prescriptions have been proposed by sister scientific societies in fields of public health, engineering, and business (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; George et al., 2016; Mabry, Olster, Morgan, & Abrams, 2008).

As this article describes how HSO research can be linked more robustly to management practice to build research capacity and research utilization, instead of critiquing the practices of managers, our arguments are focused principally on how the scholarly efforts of social work researchers can be of greater benefit to management practitioners, while creating new opportunities and resources for HSO research. We first identify challenges to the advancement and utilization of research on HSOs from the perspective of social work managers and other practitioners. Second, we review general scientific frameworks for bridging the research-to-practice gap drawn from social work and related disciplines, including models of implementation and dissemination.

Third, we propose a research infrastructure development agenda for reducing the HSO research-to-practice gap that promotes the advancement and utilization of research evidence. This agenda focuses on (a) the identification and application of new methods of organization and management science; (b) the fostering of closer collaborations between researchers and practitioners; and (c) the provision of institutional and organizational supports for human service research (for example, funding, time, mentorship and training), particularly among schools of social work and leading research funding agencies. The elements of our agenda are designed to complement but not overlap with existing models of research dissemination and utilization.

Underlying our aims is the understanding that research-practice partnerships are fostered when academics and practitioners locate mutually beneficial and common goals; address ongoing challenges related to practices, programs, and policies; and combine their diverse and complementary skill sets (Amabile et al., 2001; McBeath & Austin, 2015). The overall objective of this article is to inform a broadscale framework for social work researchers

to reduce the research-to-practice gap concerning organizational functioning and management effectiveness. We believe that a needed first step for addressing these challenges is to call attention to the existence of the research-to-practice gap, and then to suggest promising ideas for moving forward with strategic visioning and planning.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE GAP IN HSOS**

Key factors driving the research-to-practice gap in the health and human services are the very different contexts and incentives faced by academics and practitioners. This has given rise to the “two worlds” thesis, in which researchers and practitioners are understood as inhabiting largely separate spheres (Brownson et al., 2018; Cohen, 2007).

The knowledge needs of HSO practitioners can be organized around the following three dimensions reflecting the search for practical solutions, short time horizons, and context: (1) needs for topical and actionable information on how to resolve organizational dilemmas and do more, or differently, with less; (2) needs for just-in-time information in response to current practice dilemmas; and (3) needs for agency-specific and usable information as opposed to more generalized knowledge (Dill & Shera, 2015; Shaw & Lunt, 2011). HSO researchers may be challenged in pursuing research that is responsive to the needs of practitioners. Researchers may not be able to find ready solutions to many organizational dilemmas, which many see as more structural than amenable to managerial intervention (Mosley & Smith, 2018). They may not be able to carry out just-in-time research studies due to institutional review board timelines and funding limitations. And as a result of their training, socialization, and incentive structures (for example, tenure and promotion considerations), researchers may be pushed away from pursuing agency-based research that is too specific or practitioner driven and may not translate to broader interests that could benefit the field (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2009; Shaw & Faulkner, 2006).

However, under certain conditions cross-professional collaboration involving researchers and practitioners can be encouraged, particularly if they are able to acknowledge and respond effectively to different organizational expectations and norms (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). In particular, from a social work practice perspective, research is needed to help HSOs determine how to respond

to funding constraints and cutbacks, without resorting to tactics that undermine social work values and ethics (for example, rationing the delivery of essential services, underpaying workers, or failing to invest in needed technology). Such research is focused not only on description of the needs of managers, but also on identification of promising, sensible, and ethical strategies to address these needs specifically and effectively (Guerrero, Hanh, Kachikian, Chuang, & Brown, 2017; McBeath & Austin, 2015).

Such research can include

- studies that find new revenue sources that could feasibly be accessed by human service managers and available paths to access such funding;
- research that tests promising methods of increasing efficiencies of scale without sacrificing service user well-being;
- studies that examine how managers can partner with funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders to fund needed programs without reducing other priority areas;
- development of performance measurement systems that are meaningful to practitioners and that can be implemented reliably with minimal cost or training.

Currently, scholarly research tends to focus more on describing the needs and challenges of HSOs and management practitioners than the testing of promising strategies to address them (Dill & Shera, 2015; Shaw & Faulkner, 2006). For research to be useful, it should not only (a) address important practice dilemmas, but also (b) put forth potential solutions to problems and (c) include sensible results-oriented methods for implementing those solutions. In contrast, research that is often viewed by management practitioners as less than useful includes articles whose contribution is to highlight obvious organizational dilemmas and studies that propose solutions that are unrealistic or difficult to scale (Friedman, 2015; Patton, 2012). Academic research is also well known for being filled with jargon, unhelpful literature reviews, and impenetrable methods and results sections—all features that are designed to communicate more with researchers than with research users (Shaw & Lunt, 2011; Shera & Dill, 2012).

Second, time is an important dimension of the needs of management practitioners, with priority given to research that can be provided quickly in

response to current practice dilemmas (for example, integration of health information systems or funder-required performance measurement) (Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012). Historical analyses of organizational data (for example, after-action reviews) and retrospective surveys without clear implications for current practices may be of less use to practitioners who are focused on what actions should be taken now. Because requests for assistance from practitioners often reflect current or forecasted challenges, researchers may be challenged to provide the just-in-time information being requested, particularly given that it may take time to secure research funding and institutional review board approval, engage in pilot study development prior to data collection, and complete data analysis and reporting. This raises the issue of contributing to regular agency dialogues and integrating research practices at HSOs on an ongoing basis (Austin, 2018; Graff et al., 2017).

Third, the needs of management practitioners are context-specific as opposed to general in orientation. Because the research needs of practitioners are rooted in current organizational dilemmas and reflect agency priorities, practitioners are generally less interested in the results of large-scale studies of organizational populations than in research centered on agencies very similar to their own. This is the case for implementation research that requires understanding of the specific organizational context, and that searches for common elements that may be important to many organizations (for example, supportive cultures, resources, leadership, and performance management and measurement) (Aarons et al., 2011; Tabak, Khoong, Chambers, & Brownson, 2012). The specific context may reflect that small organizations, rural organizations, and organizations that rely heavily on volunteers face different challenges than the large, urban multiservice organizations that are often regarded as typical in the empirical literature. Likewise, managers in different fields of practice (for example, child welfare, mental health, or substance abuse treatment) face unique but also overlapping challenges.

### EXISTING FRAMEWORKS FOR BRIDGING THE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE GAP

Different conceptual frameworks have been proposed in public health (for example, knowledge exchange model; Tabak et al., 2012), education (knowledge production and use; Confrey, 1987), nursing (Baumbusch et al., 2008; Hutchinson & Johnston, 2004), and social

work (knowledge diffusion; Herie & Martin, 2002) to address the research-to-practice gap. These include

- dissemination and implementation models underpinned by diffusion theories and social network perspectives (Aarons et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2017) or that emphasize the empirical validation of factors associated with implementation (for example, consolidated framework for implementation research; Kirk et al., 2016);
- models that instruct researchers in the development of utilization-focused evaluation studies and a results-based accountability framework (Friedman, 2015; McNiff, 2013; Patton, 2012; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009);
- the practice research framework, in which participatory and anti-oppressive research is used to document, understand, and improve service quality, equity, and service user outcomes (Julkunen & Uggerhoj, 2016; Shaw & Lunt, 2011);
- models emphasizing the organizational strategies for building and sustaining external (for example, agency-university) and internal (for example, the development of agency-based learning communities) knowledge sharing systems (Austin, 2018; Guerrero et al., 2017)

Considered together, these frameworks generally propose knowledge sharing strategies reflecting linkages involving external researchers, HSOs, policy-makers, and knowledge brokers. In addition, practitioner leadership is viewed as essential for informing the development and utilization of research studies. From an HSO perspective, each model implies that research evidence promotes service program improvement, organizational learning, and innovation.

However, three barriers to carrying out practical, relevant HSO research remain: relevance and rigor, research translation, and resources. First, few of these models address the requirement that research should be both relevant and rigorous (Austin et al., 2012; Cohen, 2007). Without each, neither practitioners nor researchers are well served. Second, there are different perspectives, logics, and venues involved in communicating with scholars and researchers versus practitioners (Amabile et al., 2001; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). These challenges to knowledge dissemination and translation increase the cultural distance between the worlds of HSO research and practice. Finally, researchers and

practitioners face real struggles in locating needed resources to collaborate, including time, funding, and cultural brokers (Dill & Shera, 2015; McBeath & Austin, 2015).

### AN AGENDA FOR MOVING FORWARD

Toward this end, we highlight three promising avenues for enhancing the quality and relevance of HSO research at a societal level: (1) advancing scientific methodologies focused on organizational and managerial research questions (to address concerns with relevance and rigor), (2) fostering stronger connections between researchers and practitioners (to address concerns with knowledge sharing), and (3) providing institutional and organizational supports for practice-focused HSO researchers (to address concerns with resources). These promising approaches are described here and are summarized in the [appendix](#).

Our macro-level research capacity-building agenda for addressing the HSO research-to-practice gap takes the form of a strategic vision statement. This vision statement is intended to lead to collaborative strategic planning by schools of social work, social work research and practice associations, and major funding bodies. Our effort reflects and supports vision statements of the Grand Challenges for Social Work promulgated by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (Fong et al., 2018; Padilla & Fong, 2016) and visioning exercises conducted by sister scientific societies (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; George et al., 2016; Mabry et al., 2008).

### Advancing Human Service Organizational and Management Science

We first call for the development of research methods to answer practice-based research questions and increase the impact of research. These include (a) “big data” methods for curating and analyzing the quantitative and qualitative information available in large human service databases; (b) multi-level statistical models to address embedded (for example, community–agency, interorganizational, and intraorganizational) practice questions; (c) longitudinal statistical approaches to examine questions concerning sustainability and change over time; and (d) rigorous mixed-methods research designs. These methodologies can inform practice-based research linking organizational structures and processes to manager and service user outcomes. We also review developments in quantitative and

qualitative methods that can improve the quality and relevance of research on HSOs. In doing so, we reflect on the tensions involved in producing theoretically driven research that is valued by social and behavioral scientists, but also practice research that is increasingly in demand by HSOs.

First, the phenomenon of “big data” in HSOs has potential for informing management practice, policy development, and implementation (Fallon, Fillipelli, Black, Trocme, & Esposito, 2017). HSOs are frequently required by policymakers and funders to gather information from service users, frontline workers, and managers. These data are often warehoused with little consideration for their value in answering practice-based research questions. However, such data often may be useful for understanding managerial and service program efforts at different points in time and across organizations, and can also be used to advance research on the correlates and consequences of new innovations. For example, case-worker records may be used in investigations of service utilization patterns over time and across agencies; tracking of service user outputs and outcomes by program or department may allow for evaluations of new managerial strategies across contexts. Data science methods appropriate for the analysis of large-*N* samples may be used for quantitative analysis, whereas qualitative methods may be used to analyze textual records (for example, case records) (Henry, Carnochan, & Austin, 2017).

Second, person-in-environment ecological models are at the core of social work scholarship and are relevant to studies of how service users and frontline practitioners are affected by their organizational settings, the efforts of managers to address different internal and external challenges, and HSO adaptation to fiscal-policy challenges and other institutional factors (Mosley, 2017). These are topics for which data should be gathered across linked levels of analysis (that is, micro and macro) given the interdependent nature of the underlying processes being explored. An example of this concerns the question of how extra-organizational dynamics (for example, funding) and within-agency factors (for example, administrative leadership) inform the frontline implementation and sustainment of EBPs (for example, program design) that connect to individual outcomes (Aarons et al., 2011; Guerrero et al., 2017). Yet few studies gather data at multiple levels, and fewer specify multilevel statistical models that have simultaneous and recursive interactions across levels (for

example, organizational context, frontline practices, and service user outcomes). The dearth of information on these cross-level influences limits our understanding of how context informs managerial and practitioner behavior and vice versa.

Third, longitudinal research can improve understanding of the drivers of innovation and performance and assess change over time (Pettigrew, 1990). For example, prospective comparative case studies assessing the performance of matched pairs of organizations could help us understand much more about how to intervene with organizations and managers. Particularly when combined with multilevel analytical frameworks, longitudinal models are also appropriate for examining the antecedents of organizational change (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Determining when, where, how, and why learning leads to improvements in organizational performance and service user outcomes is one of the great research challenges of our generation.

Finally, mixed-methods approaches are helpful for examining the dynamic relationship between organizational context, service delivery and program innovations, and service user outcomes. Organizations are complex systems whose processes cannot be captured solely with quantitative data. Combining quantitative data collection with rigorous qualitative work that helps explain the underlying drivers of critical outcomes is important if we are to fully understand how to intervene in organizations in meaningful ways (Chuang et al., 2017). Approaches that blend quantitative and qualitative data collection—which can be done through surveys, focus groups, guided interviews, participant observation, document analysis, organizational capacity assessment tools, protocol analysis, repertory grids, Boolean comparative charts, among other methodologies—are time-intensive but can yield significantly more useful knowledge to both researchers and organizations than mono-method studies.

At the same time, important tensions exist regarding these methodological choices. For example, multilevel and data science models push the field in a heavily quantitative direction, which may conflict with more interpretivist work. In addition, researchers may avoid proposing mixed-methods research studies in an effort to reduce time and resource demands. Quantitative research studies may be ill suited to respond to practice-based questions focused on the perspectives of service users, an increasingly exploited workforce, and community members. New frontiers

in research methodology should be explored in a way that reaffirms a commitment to methodological pluralism linked to a continued emphasis on relevance and social justice (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Fostering Stronger Connections between Researchers and Practitioners**

Herein, we identify several strategies that researchers can use to bridge the worlds of research and practice, in ways that are in alignment with also helping to meet the Grand Challenges for Social Work. These include (a) the development of practice-based research partnerships and (b) the use of new research-to-practice scholarly platforms that make research more accessible for practitioners (Wandersman et al., 2008).

First, collaborations between HSOs and university research centers have become essential for improving the evidentiary basis and impacts of program innovations and organizational reforms (Austin, 2018). Seeking out practice-based research partnerships may offer immediate benefits to HSOs and allow researchers to gather data on topics of strong interest to scholars. Topics of high relevance to practice include methods for service quality enhancement and program improvement; fostering performance measurement and evaluation to inform organizational learning; evaluation of the consequences of funding streams and social innovations; the development of valid, reliable, and short measures of HSO functioning; and the testing, implementation, and scaling out of evidence-informed practices at the frontline, mid-management, and executive levels.

Practice-based research partnerships can provide traction for the Grand Challenges for Social Work. For example, the grand challenge titled “Harnessing Technology for Social Good” directly concerns the question of how managers and leaders can expand data capacity and use diverse technologies (for example, information and communication technology, human service technology) to spur innovation and growth among practitioners, HSOs, and communities (Grand Challenges for Social Work, n.d.-b). Social work researchers are critical linchpins for informing cost-effective, user-centered, and technology-based program and policy developments, thereby supporting the capacity of evidence-informed practitioners and fostering interorganizational and cross-jurisdictional knowledge sharing. Other grand challenge initiatives—including “Creating Social Responses to a Changing Environment,” “Ending Homelessness,” “Reducing Extreme Economic

Inequality,” “Building Financial Capability for All,” and “Achieving Equal Opportunity and Justice”—are similarly designed to connect social work researchers with policymakers and HSO leaders, by increasing the utilization of research knowledge through evidence-based management in HSOs and evidence-based policymaking (Brownson et al., 2018).

Several barriers to these partnerships can be anticipated. As noted earlier, managers may view research projects as nonessential and overly expensive in regard to time demands. Particularly when they are on the tenure track, university researchers may be reluctant to engage in research partnerships unless they can be easily packaged into papers for submission to peer-reviewed research journals. To produce work that builds knowledge and is relevant to practice, both parties will need to make significant investments of time to build trust with one another (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Such ongoing partnerships could enable HSO and management researchers to test new ideas, gain a deeper understanding of internal organizational functioning (which is almost impossible for outsiders to glean), and build on the strengths of practitioners (and vice versa).

Specifically, researchers may help HSOs and funders think critically and strategically about the impact of ongoing and new practice initiatives, develop clear policy expectations and program reporting mechanisms, and use internal evidence to assess their own capacity. Developing and sharing common indicators of organizational effectiveness may also help researchers and HSOs collaborate around performance measurement to track the impact of common or related programmatic activities (Hopkins, Meyer, Cohen-Callow, Mattocks, & Afkinich, in press). These and other needed research-to-practice topics could provide incentives for researchers to develop empirical studies in collaboration with agency leaders (McDermott & Bawden, 2017).

Initially, research collaboration can begin with the sharing of ideas or a proposal with leaders in different HSO roles or levels of the organization. For example, researchers might invite a group of organizations to a special workshop or training for shared learning, or invite agencies to partner with graduate-level research projects, thereby creating opportunities for agencies to engage with researchers around specific, small-scale practice needs (Graff et al., 2017). Productive early experiences can lead organizations to invest

in longer-term research relationships, particularly if HSOs and researchers can value the tangible benefits of partnering. Ultimately, a collaborative approach that involves codesigning research projects with key staff, stakeholders, and even funders contributes to buy-in and active participation in a manner that transcends the involvement of the researcher.

Schools and departments of social work hold critical roles for expanding opportunities for practice-based research focused on HSO and management issues. Many schools and departments are able to build on their existing relationships with HSOs (for example, connecting students with agency-based practicum placements or partnering to evaluate programs or initiatives). Ironically, academic researchers studying clinical practice often have stronger relationships with specific agencies and managers than do organizational and management scholars. To this end, it is important for federal, state, local, and university incentives (notably funding) to sponsor effective, sustainable HSO researcher-practitioner partnerships. In the next section, we describe methods to address needed institutional and organizational supports.

Schools and departments of social work may also stimulate practice-based research collaborations with other professional schools and social science departments and offer advanced training on interdisciplinary approaches to doctoral education (Guerrero et al., 2018). Although the footprint for organizational and management research is small in schools of social work, it is comparatively larger in schools of business, public policy and public affairs, public health, sociology, political science, and psychology. These other schools and departments may have connections to HSOs that can benefit social work researchers. It may also be possible for social work faculty with organizational and management interests to join others across campus with shared interests to develop practice-based research networks. For example, the University of Michigan Interdisciplinary Committee on Organizational Studies (<https://www.icos.umich.edu/>) offers a well-attended lecture series, keeps an updated list of organizational and managerial courses across various schools and departments, and provides small competitive research awards for faculty and graduate students.

The second strategy to strengthen research-practice collaborations involves research dissemination to promote usability. Making research more accessible for practitioners is clearly a central task if it is to be used (Wandersman et al., 2008). Researchers should use

open-access publishing opportunities whenever available. Open-access archives—notably, SocArXiv for most social sciences (<https://socopen.org/>) and arXiv for science, math, computer science, engineering, and economics (<https://arxiv.org/>)—are increasingly used in other disciplines. These serve as low-cost repositories for scholars to upload preprints of their accepted manuscripts so as to share knowledge with organizations and practitioners without access to peer-reviewed journals. Specific research-to-practice repositories, perhaps sponsored by an organization like the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), could archive reports written for funders or community partners that are often helpful to practitioners but difficult to locate.

Research-to-practice action memos, which distill key themes and practice implications from the scholarly literature, should be a more regular part of knowledge dissemination and translation. Such memos should include development of short article summaries (for example, similar to that used by the *Harvard Business Review*) shared on practitioner Listservs. The journal *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance* is spearheading some of these efforts. The use of social media by researchers, journalists, and science writers should also be encouraged. Finally, researchers should give back more to organizations than just final dissemination reports. Actionable performance strategies and tailored presentations for specific groups, programs, and learning networks are some of the deliverables that could be negotiated so that HSOs opening up their processes for study can benefit from the research.

### **Strengthening Institutional and Organizational Supports to Address the Research-to-Practice Gap**

These efforts to enhance human service organizational and management science, practice-based research partnerships, and knowledge dissemination and use require time, funding, training, and mentorship. As noted by Ioannidis and Khoury (2014), “Production of scientific work is regulated by reward systems” (p. 483). McRoy, Flanzer, and Zlotnick (2012) suggested that social work research depends on strong administrative infrastructure for grant development and project implementation, research centers that serve as hubs for knowledge creation and sharing, senior scholars and researchers who supply mentorship, and established training programs for early career investigators and

graduate students. These internal and external supports facilitate the creation and sustainment of research development pipelines through which researchers gain access to advanced knowledge, develop expertise through applied research studies, are connected with mentors and specialized knowledge networks, and are afforded professional opportunities at critical developmental stages (for example, the transition to doctoral candidate or assistant professor).

From this perspective, the dearth of HSO and management researchers can be traced to the lack of formal incentives and resources within schools of social work and externally in regard to the few funders, policymakers, and other bodies (for example, foundations) specifically dedicated to organizational and management research (Mosley, 2017). These needs include specialized training in HSOs and management, availability of senior researchers to mentor emerging scholars, and perhaps most important, predoctoral and postdoctoral traineeships in research centers focused on organizational and management topics. Our experience suggests that each of these resources is in short supply in schools of social work.

As a result, students, early career investigators, and more senior researchers may struggle to receive the training and resources needed for original inquiry. Moreover, the developmental consequences of lacking access to needed research supports may be reinforced over time. For example, doctoral students without access to specialized traineeships may struggle to develop HSO and management dissertation studies, thereby reducing opportunities for research collaboration and publication prospects as tenure-track professors. These effects may extend intergenerationally, as early career investigators who struggle to locate mentorship from senior scholars and researchers may not have sufficient opportunities to practice being an effective mentor. The dearth of these resources and opportunities weakens the professional trajectories of HSO and management researchers and, overall, reduces the legitimacy of research on HSOs and management in schools of social work.

Strategies for action should include engaging national funders to develop an institutional awards pipeline for HSO and management research projects, investigators, and traineeships. For example, the effort to expand the involvement of social work in mental health research was led in the 1990s by key administrators at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (Zlotnick,

Biegel, & Solt, 2002). These efforts were facilitated by leading social work researchers with substantial NIMH reputations.

A parallel effort is required to expand research funding for HSO and management researchers. These funding opportunities should not be focused solely on downstream outcomes for service users but should also advance research on innovations in organizational and management practice. For example, the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government Awards in American Governance promote policy and practice excellence in public sector organizations; we envision a similar award dedicated to research on HSOs and management. With the exception of the National Science Foundation Program on the Science of Organizations, few federal funding institutes sponsor HSO and management research directly.

These actions among national professional organizations and funders should be centered on the vision of a braided stream of different competitive funding opportunities. We think of these as falling along two dimensions: (1) size and scope and (2) degree to which the research is centered on HSOs and managers. Research opportunities reflecting the first dimension range from large, inter-institutional projects to smaller, investigator-focused awards. Examples of large projects include the development of cross-institutional training programs anchored by leading research centers that provide opportunities for applied research, training, and mentorship, as can be seen in the mid-1990s development of research and training centers by the National Institute on Drug Abuse in prevention science and NIMH in mental health research. Smaller awards, in contrast, may sponsor investigator-initiated research blending attention to science and practice.

An initial step in developing this field is to call attention to the problem among leading organizations representing social work academics and practitioners. The former include SSWR, the Council on Social Work Education, and the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work. Calls for action among leaders of some of these organizations have taken place, particularly involving the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice. However, these efforts have generally concerned curricular improvement and student enrollment expansion efforts more than research infrastructural needs. A national agenda sponsoring discussion and strategic

planning concerning the connections between HSO and management research and practice is therefore overdue.

Professional associations focused on HSO and management research, including the SSWR Organizations and Management Special Interest Group, the Association for Community Organization and Social Action, and the Association for Research on Nonprofit and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), can provide needed bridges for academics and practitioners. These groups are focused on the development of research pipelines through which researchers are connected with mentors and specialized knowledge networks, and gain access to professional opportunities at critical developmental stages. Several have developed inexpensive methods to expand professional development opportunities.

For example, ARNOVA provides fellowships to doctoral students and emerging scholars to defray the costs of conference travel and registration. The conference program is organized to appeal to junior scholars and includes roundtables organized by topic, allowing doctoral students to receive feedback from senior scholars (who serve in a discussant role); panels are often focused on career development (for example, tips for preparing research papers and submitting for peer review); a competitive preconference workshop provides a forum for doctoral candidates to work with senior researchers on their dissertation projects. Similarly, the Network for Social Work Management sponsors a preconference Doctoral Scholars Institute for social work management faculty and doctoral students to network, discuss dissertation research and scholarly publication opportunities, advance collaborative research-to-practice projects, and identify macro practice research infrastructure opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, our research capacity-building arguments are organized around a broad strategic vision to address the HSO research-to-practice gap, expand access for social work managers and other practitioners to needed research, and promote new opportunities for HSO research and scholarship. To address the major challenge of delivering effective health and human services with limited resources, management practitioners require evidence-informed recommendations that are relevant, timely, scalable, and reliable. These expectations require researchers to be well versed in practice-based research partnerships. We also encourage the use of research methods exploring available

agency data, evaluating organizationally rooted processes over levels of practice and time, and analyzing interrelationships involving individual behavior and organizational context. Our topics are important for social work researchers interested in the effective delivery of health and human services, where there is a need to understand the micro, meso, and macro levels of social work practice (including policy and community practice). Our arguments also reference the research capacity-building goals of sister professions (notably the health sciences, management sciences, and public administration and policy sciences).

For practitioners to pay attention to our work, we need to focus on topics that HSOs and managers currently struggle to address. These include improving frontline service delivery efficiency, effectiveness, and equity, and enhancing organizational performance; developing participatory organizational cultures and knowledge sharing systems; and using agency data for organizational learning and improvement in ways that are cost-effective and meaningful for managerial and frontline practitioners. We see the importance of researchers linking organizational processes to service user outcomes and developing and testing evidence-informed methods for developing innovative, equity-focused programs, agencies, and systems. Providing organizational and managerial supports for practice-focused research, and having stronger relationships with practitioners, can help in achieving these goals.

From an institutional and organizational perspective focused on research infrastructure development, the education and training of doctoral students and early career investigators in HSO and management practice is critical for closing the research-to-practice gap. There are emerging models of multidisciplinary and team science approaches that involve research-to-practice training for early career investigators (Guerrero et al., 2018). As the profession of social work seeks to tackle some of the most intractable problems, it is critical to prepare future researchers in collaborative university-HSO models that advance knowledge translation.

This logic parallels the efforts of the Grand Challenges for Social Work (Fong et al., 2018; Padilla & Fong, 2016). Our research capacity-building agenda for addressing the HSO research-to-practice gap envisions a macro-level approach for identifying grand strategies to address the Grand Challenges for Social Work. In particular, our three-part agenda is designed to help schools and departments of social work

strengthen connections between (a) the social problem focus of the Grand Challenges for Social Work and (b) the institutional and organizational capacity-building focus of social work researchers and HSO leaders.

Connected to these challenges is the enduring question of the relevance of social work research for HSO and management practice, particularly concerning the topics that researchers study, the conceptual and methodological tools we use, and how we frame our work. If we wonder whether HSO leaders and managers are paying sufficient attention to social work research, then perhaps it is because we are not communicating and collaborating with them in a manner that is meaningful to them. Academic-practitioner collaborations and environmental scanning are needed to address essential field-level challenges and the search for innovations to major agency-based challenges.

Of course, this does not imply that HSO researchers should only produce research reflecting current practitioner demands. Focusing on research-practice partnerships may lead to work that is problem-oriented to the point of being disconnected from larger bodies of scholarly literature and theory development. Investments in small-scale, time-limited, and specific solutions to HSO and management practice dilemmas should not diminish the usefulness of our research or our ability to build knowledge. However, given the limited emphasis to date on practice research and knowledge translation, we would argue for a more balanced approach. In sum, demonstrating evidence of what works and sharing what can be done differently or better for HSOs, managers, and service users is, indeed, building knowledge, albeit more concrete and less abstract. **SWR**

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Original manuscript received January 5, 2018  
 Final revision received May 11, 2018  
 Editorial decision May 16, 2018  
 Accepted May 25, 2018  
 Advance Access Publication April 3, 2019

## APPENDIX: STRATEGIC VISION TO REDUCE THE RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE GAP AND BUILD RESEARCH CAPACITY IN HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

### Domain 1: Advancing Science on Human Service Organizations and Management

- Developing research methods to answer practice-based research questions and increase the impact of research:
- “Big data” methods for curating and analyzing quantitative and qualitative information in large administrative databases
- Multilevel statistical models to address questions connecting macro to micro
- Longitudinal approaches to examine sustainability and change over time
- Rigorous mixed-methods research designs to understand how to improve organizations
- Exploring new frontiers in research methodology in a way that reaffirms a commitment to methodological pluralism linked to a continued emphasis on relevance and social justice

### Domain 2: Strengthening Connections between Researchers and Practitioners

- Promoting practice-based research partnerships to increase knowledge use:

- At the researcher level, identifying opportunities for research–practice collaboration beginning with specific, small-scale practice projects
- At the organizational level, building on the existing relationships of schools of social work, research institutes, and leading human service organizations (HSOs)
- At the institutional level, promoting interprofessional and interdisciplinary research and education focused on HSOs and management
- Using low-cost dissemination strategies to increase knowledge sharing:
  - Open-access publishing and social media (for example, blogs) to promote research access and use
  - Research-to-practice action memos and tailored presentations for groups, programs, and learning networks focused on HSOs

### Domain 3: Providing Institutional and Organizational Supports for Macro Practice Research

- Among schools and departments of social work, provision of specialized research training, mentorship of early career researchers, and predoctoral and postdoctoral traineeships in research centers focused on organizational and management topics
- At the inter-institutional level, initiating a call for human service organizational and management research and practice among leading social work research societies and professional associations
- Engaging national-level funders to develop an institutional awards pipeline for human service organizational and management research projects, investigators, and traineeships

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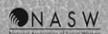
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