Recognizing New Opportunities: Reconceptualizing Policy Advocacy in Everyday Organizational Practice

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Policy advocacy is a concept that is of both practical and historical importance to the profession of social work. To keep up with developments in how advocacy is practiced at the ground level, however, social work research on advocacy needs to expand in scope. Changes in government contracting and public management practices have reshaped the opportunity structure for policy advocacy, incentivizing a kind of advocacy that is routine, professionalized, and collaborative. At the same time, these practices have raised questions about democratic representation and the degree to which social work advocacy adequately reflects client concerns. This article presents a model for how policy advocacy can be usefully reconceptualized to account for changes in the policy and funding environment and concludes by suggesting ways that social work research and theory can better reflect practice realities.

KEY WORDS: *advocacy; collaborative governance; nonprofit organizations; privatization*

The long relationship between social work and policy advocacy is well known. From the pioneering work of Jane Addams and her contemporaries in the early 20th century, to the rise of community organizing in the 1960s, to the current popularity of student and professional lobby days, advocacy is clearly part of social work's professional identity (Hoefer, 2006; Schneider & Lester, 2001). Unfortunately, despite the importance of policy advocacy to the profession, there are serious knowledge gaps about how rapidly changing political and institutional arrangements may be reshaping its nature and content, for example, how policy advocacy is carried out by nonprofit service providers and what is advocated for. These political and institutional shifts include increased dependence on government funds in the social service sector, reduced administrative capacity in state and local government, and a growth in opportunities to collaborate with government officials. These changes in the policy environment, partially a result of 30 years of privatization and devolution, coincide with a sharp rise in a market-based service provision ideology since the 1980s. This ideology has shifted the way that social rights are construed, how human service nonprofits interact with government, and how social services are delivered (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012).

Whereas social workers and the human service nonprofits they work for are involved in many kinds of advocacy, this article focuses specifically on policy advocacy. *Policy advocacy* is advocacy that is directed at changing policies or regulations that affect practice or group well-being. Policy advocacy is distinct from *case* or *client advocacy*, which is advocacy on behalf of families and individuals (Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997). Thus, for the sake of simplicity, when the word *advocacy* is used in this article, it can be assumed to mean policy advocacy, unless otherwise specified. A burgeoning new field of research gives reason to believe that changes in the organizational and political context have opened up new spaces for policy advocacy, giving social workers more opportunities to engage in this type of advocacy as part of their everyday practice. However, these new opportunities also come with an increased risk of co-optation and potential loss of focus on political equality and client needs.

Social work scholars frequently express the profession's commitment to advocacy practice, for example, in textbooks or as a research implication. There remains, however, a strong need for empirical evidence about how that commitment is currently being carried out and how the aforementioned changes in the policy environment may influence advocacy practice. Without greater

attention to the organizational and political environment in which advocacy now takes place, it is impossible to fully understand the constraints and incentives that exist for potential advocates, how advocacy work can best be facilitated, or how it can be made more effective. This article presents recent evidence on these trends while pointing out where knowledge still needs to be developed. For example, to strengthen advocacy involvement, more needs to be known about the organizational context of advocacy, rather than just individual involvement. This includes constraints and motivations for nonprofit service providers, as well as issues such as resource limitations and the role of government funding (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2010). Scholars also need to further explore the growing use of insider tactics (Carnochan & Austin, 2011), how policymakers perceive social work advocates (Hoefer, 2005), and the implications of a changed relationship between service providers and government (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to highlight emerging trends in the policy environment that have reshaped the opportunity structure for policy advocacy, suggesting new areas for research and ways in which advocacy can be usefully reconceptualized for 21st century realities. This article addresses how the aforementioned changes in public management practice, particularly the growth in government contracting and collaborative governance, may be changing both the opportunities for, and potentially the nature of, policy advocacy. These new institutional arrangements have increased reciprocity and collaboration between private human service providers and government, and, as a result, may lead advocacy that is increasingly collaborative rather than conflictual advocacy (Mosley, 2012). For example, human service nonprofits are now often involved in participatory process mechanisms or trade associations (for example, statewide associations of child welfare or mental health organizations), which are growing in strength and numbers (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). As a result, advocacy can be reconceptualized as part of everyday organizational practice for many social workers. For this to happen, however, there needs to be more widespread recognition of these opportunities and improved understanding of what they mean.

At the same time, some of these changes have raised questions about democratic representation: Does policy advocacy accurately reflect the preferences of the people social workers claim to speak for? For policy advocacy to be seen as legitimate, social work must deal with critiques from both scholars and policymakers that the profession is self-serving, ineffective, or co-opted (Jordan, 2004). The article concludes by suggesting several ways the research agenda on advocacy can be productively advanced, including increased attention to how the profession can improve policies for vulnerable families, not just maintain current programs and funding levels, as well as find ways to increase the voices of organizations (and clients) with low rates of advocacy participation. Making sure advocacy is focused firmly on the needs of clients and promoting political inclusion is important for improving political equality and ultimately achieving meaningful social change (Cummins, Byers, & Pedrick, 2011).

DEFINING POLICY ADVOCACY

Ezell (2001) defined policy advocacy as "purposive efforts to change specific existing or proposed policies or practices on behalf of or with a specific client or group of clients" (p. 23). Similarly, Jenkins (1987) defined policy advocacy as "any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest" (p. 297). Although some definitions of policy advocacy are narrower, for example, specifically mentioning a social justice focus (for example, Cummins et al., 2011; Hoefer, 2006), these broad and inclusive definitions of policy advocacy most accurately capture the wide variety of activities social workers participate in.

Schneider and Lester (2001) identified four types of advocacy social workers engage in: client (or case), cause, legislative, and administrative. With the exception of client advocacy, all are ways of approaching policy advocacy with different tactics. They are all policy advocacy because they focus on changing policy or regulation. Indeed, research has indicated that policy advocacy carried out by human service nonprofits includes both of what political scientists call insider and outsider tactics (Mosley, 2011). *Insider tactics* are carried out with policymakers directly and include activities such as lobbying, providing testimony, and sitting on policy committees. *Outsider tactics* are often more confrontational and include social action, protest, and media campaigns (Walker, 1991). The tactics chosen and the content of the advocacy message depend on the organizational, political, and

institutional context. Thus, advocacy can be productively thought of as inclusive of many different types of approaches, including highly collaborative ones. It should not be thought of as inherently conflictual.

Policy advocacy can be done in support of client, organizational, or professional interests. In the literature, policy advocacy is often assumed to mean advocacy on behalf of a cause, whereas policy advocacy in support of maintaining funding is sometimes questioned (Jenson & Phillips, 1996). It must be recognized, however, that often organizational and client interests are aligned. Furthermore, advocacy for a cause (for example, ending homelessness) and advocacy for funding (for example, for a transitional housing program) are often conflated, and this goal ("get money for a transitional housing program to help end homelessness") is often pursued through advocating through both administrative and legislative channels. Who is to say that advocacy that helps maintain organizational stability is not also helping clients? Thus, although it is often difficult to know when organizations are simply advocating in their own interests and when there is a client benefit, both are important types of policy advocacy engaged in by human service advocates.

Finally, although advocacy is often improved by being at least partially client driven, advocacy can happen without client involvement. In some cases clients lack the capacity to be involved (for example, young children, people who are severely disabled), and in other cases advocacy may require professional expertise. In other words, advocacy does not necessarily mean empowerment and mobilization, although it can, and many believe that under ideal conditions it should (Mondros & Wilson, 1994).

POLICY ADVOCACY IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN SERVICE NONPROFITS

One aspect of policy advocacy that has historically been under-recognized in the literature is that advocacy choices are largely organizationally driven. Although research has often focused on the advocacy involvement of individual social workers (for example, Domanski, 1998), in practice, because most social workers are based in organizations, advocacy almost always happens in an organizational context (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). This means that the constraints and incentives an organization experiences with regard to advocacy are crucial in determining the likelihood of any individual within it being able to participate in advocacy (Hasenfeld, 2009). Of course, individuals must speak on behalf of organizations, but their action is largely guided by the organizational context. These individuals are generally managers, not line staff, for reasons of both time and legitimacy (Salamon, Geller, & Lorentz, 2008), as well as training (Hoefer, 2005). Constraints are both managerial (interest in advocacy, knowledge, skills, professional networks) and structural (organizational size, resources, collaborative opportunities) (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2010).

It should be noted that many types of organizations may take advantage of the opportunities mentioned here, for example, religious congregations or professional interest groups. However, because social work practitioners are most often embedded in privately run human service nonprofits, this article focuses primarily on the advocacy involvement of those organizations. As a result of resource constraints, these organizations typically focus on advocacy at the state and local levels; this article will follow suit (Salamon et al., 2008).

THE POLICY-MAKING ENVIRONMENT: EMERGING TRENDS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Three trends in contemporary policy practice have greatly influenced the way advocacy is carried out: (1) the increased reliance on government funding by social service nonprofits (Smith, 2009), (2) reduced government capacity as a result of budgetary constraints (Kettl, 2000), and (3) the growth of participatory processes and other collaborative governance mechanisms (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Each of these trends has led to a change in the power relationship between social service nonprofits and government agencies and opened up new opportunities for advocacy. Together, they suggest new pathways for promoting more equitable public policies and increasing the voice of the marginalized.

Government Funding

Privatization of social services has fundamentally changed the way social services are provided in the United States (Smith, 2009). Most human service nonprofits are now dependent on government funds, profoundly reshaping the advocacy environment for those providers. Although some scholars have expressed concern that this dependence

might reduce advocacy involvement for fear of putting funding at risk (Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008), recently research has shown that the opposite is true. For human service nonprofits, increased government funding is associated with higher rates of advocacy participation and use of collaborative insider tactics (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2010, 2011). This is likely because organizations that are more dependent on government funding have increased incentives to advocate—they want to make sure the funding streams they depend on are not cut. For this reason, although dependence on government funding has not reduced advocacy involvement, there is evidence that it may change how organizations advocate, or what they advocate for. For example, Mosley (2012) showed that government funding increases the reciprocal relationship-building aspects of advocacy and leads to advocacy messages that are more often about funding needs than substantive policy change.

Reduced Government Capacity

At the same time that social service nonprofits are increasingly dependent on government funds for their daily operations, many state and local governments are facing serious budget crises. As a result of the recession that began in 2007, income from tax receipts has dropped precipitously, leading many state and local governments to scramble to find revenue to fund programs (Johnson, Oliff, & Williams, 2010). As more programs that vulnerable clients depend on face elimination or cutbacks, advocacy is needed more than ever. However, these budget crises mean that public agencies have faced their own cutbacks, and many now face severe staffing shortages. This makes it harder for state and local agencies to do their work, such as implementing policies and overseeing regulations. As a result, public agencies increasingly value the assistance and expertise that private sector providers, including human service organizations, can provide; indeed, in some cases they are dependent on it (Alexander & Nank, 2009). All of these issues led to the possibility for new advocacy opportunities and greater influence for private sector providers.

Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance is a term used in the public administration literature to refer to the numerous ways in which public agencies are now trying to collaborate with private stakeholders, such as social service providers, to improve service coordination and policy feedback through consensus-oriented decision making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Collaborative governance is thought to improve policy implementation, reduce conflict between public and private stakeholders, and improve government accountability. One aspect of collaborative governance is that it has led to an increase in a variety of participatory processes in which social work advocates—as representatives of nonprofit organizations—take part. These processes include advisory boards, task forces, and steering committees. For collaborative governance to be successful in meeting its goals, active and meaningful inclusion of relevant stakeholders, like nonprofit service providers, is a necessity (Vigoda, 2002). This opens up significant opportunities for providers to be involved in the policy process, provide input on crucial decisions, and share expertise (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This is essentially an advocacy role. If advocacy is indeed "any attempt to influence the decisions of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest" (Jenkins, 1987, p. 297), participation in these processes is just one more tactic that social work advocates can use to try and shape the policy environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING ADVOCACY PRACTICE

A visual model of how these different practices work together to increase opportunities for advocacy is presented in Figure 1. First, both privatization and reduced government capacity have partially contributed to the growth of collaborative governance because they have increased government reliance on the private sector for expertise and assistance with implementation. Second, all three of these trends have led to an increased need for trust and reciprocity between government and private stakeholders. Government contracting of social services is reliant on trust to work effectively, and both sides have a stake in establishing reciprocal relationships (Alexander & Nank, 2009). The participatory processes that result from collaborative governance efforts also are fostered by trust and reciprocity—they grow and become more meaningful when the partners involved learn to trust one another (Ansell & Gash, 2008). As a result of all of these factors—privatization, reduced government capacity, collaborative governance models, and the need for increased trust and reciprocity between sectors—there are increased opportunities
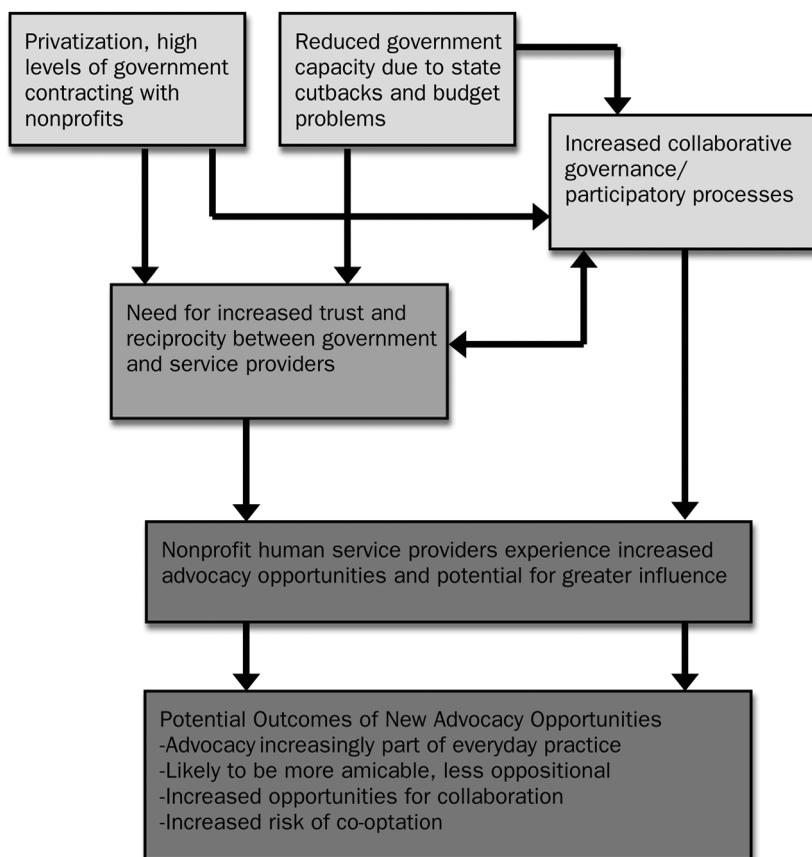

Figure 1: How Changes in Public Management Practices Have Increased Policy Advocacy Opportunities

for human service providers to be involved in policy advocacy and potentially a larger role for them (in terms of influence) once they become involved.

However, it is important to monitor power imbalances in government–nonprofit relationships if trust is to be built and advocacy is to be successful. Collaborative governance works best when the parties have a high degree of interdependence or a history of cooperation and trust (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Because many human service organizations are now dependent on government funds, a power imbalance is often thought to exist in that relationship (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). It can be argued, however, that the reliance of government on nonprofit contractors and reduced government capacity may be shifting that balance of power, particularly if human service organizations become

more active in advocacy as a way of influencing their environment. Power is not a zero-sum game, and most exchange relationships involve some degree of interdependence (Emerson, 1962). In this case, the power of government partners can be seen as stemming from authority and financial resources, but providers bring legitimacy and expertise. Both parties need to understand what they bring to the table.

These shifts suggest several implications for research and practice on policy advocacy, as seen in the bottom box of Figure 1. First, everyday communications and relationship building may grow in importance. As organizations develop stronger ties with government partners, advocacy is likely to become increasingly friendly, not oppositional (Staggenborg, 1988). Although there will always be a place for rallies and bringing people together to demonstrate strength

and outrage, as these trends continue, forming amicable reciprocal relationships with government administrators may be an increasingly vital part of the successful manager's advocacy toolbox. Indeed, the growth of participatory processes and government contracts has made everyday interactions with government officials increasingly common for many social work managers (Mosley, 2012). Through those everyday interactions, social workers have the ability to effect change, incrementally shifting the agenda and reframing the conversation. Recognizing and taking advantage of those opportunities will be important if social workers are to capitalize on these shifts in the policy environment (Cummins et al., 2011). This is not to say that more conflictual strategies cannot still be usefully engaged, just that they may be more rare.

Second, these changes have the potential to open up the field of advocacy for providers who previously felt they did not have the time or resources to become involved. Research has shown that time and resource constraints are a major barrier for social service organizations that want to become meaningfully involved in advocacy (Berry & Arons, 2003). Most organizations are never going to be able to hire a lobbyist, organize a protest, or mount a major legislative campaign, but they often pick up the phone to call an administrator in state government with whom they already have a funding relationship. These conversations can have an advocacy component. Increased incentives to advocate in order to protect funding may also motivate some organizational leaders who would not find the time otherwise.

Third, these opportunities may lead to increased collaboration among social service providers, facilitating advocacy. The growth of formal participatory processes and trade associations with strong links to state government provide more opportunities for organizations to get involved without cutting into service delivery priorities. With many different types of organizations involved in participatory processes—providers, advocacy organizations, community-based organizations—organizations also have a chance to learn from and network with one another. These mixed-type advocacy alliances can be very successful (Dluhy, 1990).

Finally, it must be recognized that all of these opportunities also lead to an increased risk for co-optation (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Because of the power imbalance mentioned above,

government can and does use the promise of "collaboration" as a way of co-opting nonprofit partners. Organizations will be at high risk for co-optation if managers do not pay attention to mission drift and make sure that client and organizational interests are aligned. This suggests an ongoing, and perhaps intensifying, need to bring the voice of clients into organizations (Hasenfeld, 2009). Increased accountability to client concerns, perhaps taking lessons from community practice, may be an important way of making sure that co-optation does not happen.

ADDRESSING THE CRITICS

Despite the opportunities described earlier, if social work organizations are to take their role as advocates seriously, then managers must engage with critiques. Three in particular stand out: (1) that social work advocates are self-serving, out to protect their jobs and industry; (2) that because social work advocates are largely self-appointed, their concerns are not necessarily reflective of community concerns; and (3) that social work advocates are ineffective as a result of lack of training and sophistication. Because these critiques may intensify as human service organizations develop closer relationships with government decision makers, each will be addressed in turn.

The first of these critiques, that social work advocates are primarily self-serving, has become ever more pressing to confront as social service agencies become increasingly dependent on government funds. It is clear that organizations that are dependent on government funds for their continued operations have a clear incentive to advocate for continued government investment in supporting those funding streams. This easily leads to claims that social workers advocating for maintaining funding are just protecting their turf and looking out for their own interests. The tricky thing about this critique is that there is an element of truth to it—social work jobs and organizations do depend on those funding streams. There is also some evidence that the content of the advocacy performed by social service agencies that are highly reliant on government funds is less about client concerns and more about maintaining funding streams (Mosley, 2012). As a result, some research has suggested that as nonprofits become more dependent on government funding, government stakeholders have viewed their advocacy

involvement more skeptically (Jenson & Phillips, 1996).

The second of these critiques is related to the first—this is that because social work advocacy is often self-appointed (for example, social workers are generally not formally authorized by the communities they represent to speak on their behalf), it is a threat to democratic representation. The concern is that because advocates, not community members, define the problems and solutions they may not be representative of the community's true concerns (Montanaro, 2010). This can lead to accusations of paternalism, which social work has long fought. Many collaborative governance processes are actually intended for citizen feedback; nonprofit organizations simply stand in as representatives of a particular community or client group. This is problematic in the event that only those that are invited, or have the resources to get noticed, will take part, and thus will have an unjustified impact on policy and regulatory development (Vigoda, 2002). It is also a problem to the degree that it hinders the political development of clients themselves.

Social work advocates can address both of these critiques in two different ways. First, when possible, advocates need to engage clients in efforts to protect the services they depend on. Promoting the voices and participation of clients themselves is crucial if social workers are to claim legitimate representation and demonstrate that they are not simply self-serving. Although some worry that client inclusion is often just for show, social work research in the 1960s and 1970s had a major focus on helping people who were poor to advocate directly and involving them as participants in the process (Becker, 1968; Richan, 1973). A resurgence of research of this type, and corresponding efforts to engage clients, is needed.

Second, representation by social work organizations, even if it is self-appointed, can reduce political inequality. Many of the groups social workers represent—such as people who are poor, people with disabilities, children, and those involved with the criminal justice system—have lower rates of participation in voting (or cannot vote at all) and less of a voice in the formal political system (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Advocates should highlight these issues of political inequality and find ways to demonstrate the value of public programs for clients. However, social work advocacy helps rectify those inequities only to the degree that it adequately reflects clients' concerns (Montanaro, 2010). Rather than just assuming social workers know best, work needs to be done to engage clients and learn about their preferences.

The last of these critiques is that social workers often lack the advanced training and knowledge of tactics that would make them more effective advocates (Hoefer, 2005). For example, research has shown that nonprofit leaders often have a poor understanding of advocacy law, which may lead them to be less active than they could be (Bass, Arons, Guinane, & Carter, 2007). This critique can be addressed in several ways. First, advocacy education should be increased in MSW programs. Many schools have limited advocacy training, so social work advocates have to learn on the job (Rocha, Poe, & Thomas, 2010). If social workers are to compete with lawyers and professional lobbyists, they need to be equipped with the tools to be effective. Second, advocacy efforts should be more clearly tied to research. Clear evidence about the cost-effectiveness of social work services and the benefits they provide to vulnerable populations is an increasingly important advocacy tool in times of government fiscal austerity.

CONCLUSION: A PROPOSED RESEARCH AGENDA

To take advantage of these opportunities and create meaningful social change, steps should be taken to strengthen advocacy practice. This means making sure that practitioners are adequately trained and that they recognize these everyday opportunities to influence policy. It also requires moving research forward, including the changing nature of advocacy and the conditions under which it occurs. Four areas, in particular, deserve increased attention.

First, more research should focus on what organizations are doing in regard to advocacy, as opposed to individuals. In general, it is *organizations* that get invited to engage in participatory processes and *organizations* that establish relationships through funding (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). Individuals are important in facilitating relationships, but leaders speak on behalf of their organization, not themselves. It is vital to increase our knowledge about which organizations engage in policy advocacy, how they engage in it, and why, to make sure that a diversity of organizational voices are being heard. There is a danger that those organizations with the most resources, the most government funding, and

already established relationships may come to dominate the advocacy process. More knowledge about which organizations participate in policy advocacy, why, and what barriers exist will help raise the voices of organizations that currently do not participate to the degree they could. This includes organizations with smaller budgets, those that are faith based, and those that serve particular ethnic and racial groups (Mosley, 2010, 2012). Because these organizations may represent clients facing unique types of marginalization, increased knowledge about their participation is also important for addressing political inequality and other critiques mentioned earlier.

Second, research should focus more on the formal and informal collaborative processes in which everyday advocacy interactions take place. These include the participatory processes mentioned earlier as well as trade associations, provider-led coalitions, and other professional networks. These groups hold great promise for leveraging power and ensuring that social work expertise is communicated in the policy process (Cummins et al., 2011). Learning how they can be effectively managed, which organizations are likely to participate, and what strategies contribute to their success are vital as these collaborations become more central to policymaking. Social workers that continue to view advocacy as primarily conflictual will miss opportunities to influence policy in ways that may benefit their clients and other vulnerable populations.

Third, it is necessary to talk to the end users of social work advocacy, such as legislators and state agency administrators, to understand how they perceive social work advocacy efforts, what types of advocacy and issue framing are most effective, and how evidence is used. The perspective of these individuals is crucial because their perceptions help drive the extent to which policy advocacy efforts are taken seriously and trust is built. For example, recently there has been an uptick of research on social workers' use of Internet-based advocacy (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Menon, 2000). It is still unknown, however, whether those tactics are effective and how they compare with interpersonal relationship–based advocacy.

Finally, we need to know more about how clients perceive and experience the advocacy efforts of social service organizations. We are only beginning to learn whether community members recognize that providers play this role or the degree to which they see social work advocacy as legitimately representing their concerns (Chung, Grogan, & Mosley, 2012). Neither should be simply assumed. Research should focus on how advocacy can be maximally attentive to client concerns and strategies for facilitating ongoing communication about advocacy efforts with clients when they cannot be involved themselves. The community practice literature has important insights into this area and may be an important resource for advocacy scholars (Gilson, 1998; Sanders & Schnabel, 2007). Of course, part of this is making sure that social work advocacy focuses on actually improving and strengthening policies for vulnerable families, not just maintaining current funding levels. Thus, research should pay attention to the content of advocacy, exploring when and how organizational and client interests are aligned.

If social work is able to move forward in these areas, while dealing with the critiques regarding self-interest, social work is positioned to lead a new renaissance in advocacy, potentially leading to important improvements in social service funding, agency functioning, and ultimately client outcomes. **SW**

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