What is Advanced in Generalist Practice? A Conceptual Discussion

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Advanced generalist practice is the fastest growing area of concentration for Master of Social Work (MSW) programs in the United States, yet a definition remains elusive. This article proposes that three key elements should be included within a conceptual schema of advanced generalist practice. Multidimensional problem-setting, self-reflective leadership, and ethical advocacy form the basis of a model for advanced generalist practice. Discussion of the epistemology of advanced practice highlights the connection between advanced generalist practice and the experienced practitioner. Discussion regarding what makes practice advanced is presented and related to curriculum development.

KEYWORDS advanced generalist, social work practice, curriculum development

A review of summary data from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) reveals that advanced generalist practice is the fastest growing area of concentration for Master of Social Work (MSW) programs in the United States. In 2000, there were approximately a dozen MSW with an advanced generalist practice concentration, and currently, there are approximately three dozen programs with this focus spanning all regions of the country (CSWE, 2006). Its growth is remarkable given that advanced generalist practice is traditionally associated with rural or frontier regions, whereas many of the current programs are in urban or metropolitan settings. In fact, few advanced generalist programs include “rural” or “frontier” in their missions. Although lacking regional or demographic similarity, programs with concentrations in advanced generalist practice are more likely to be
recently accredited (CSWE, 2004, 2006). Because advanced generalist practice is an emerging and growing area in social work education, discussion is needed to address definitional quandaries, identify related conceptual models, and provide relevant curricula.

It was long assumed that rural settings, with their limited resources and unique character, would benefit from an advanced generalist practitioner—a social worker who wore many hats and could change them often in response to competing client and community needs (Campbell, 1990; Martinez-Brawley, 2000). While urban and metropolitan settings may be better resourced than their rural counterparts, they, too, struggle with shortages of personnel and services. Given the rapidly changing social service environment and the resultant competition for limited resources, the same arguments that place advanced generalists in small towns also support their fit within urban contexts (Barber, 1995). Furthermore, the devolution of services to states and communities has the potential of creating more “small towns” that need to devise local solutions to broader problems such as poverty and child abuse. Whether responding to managed care directives or justifying the need for services to policymakers, direct practitioners must be able to understand and work with audiences beyond their identified clients.

Given the increased number of advanced generalist MSW programs, it behooves us to articulate the conceptual model(s) that undergird our teaching. This article proposes a working model of advanced generalist practice that includes the critical tenets of a supporting curriculum. When we identify key elements, then an understanding of what makes this practice advanced can also be elucidated as the distinction between generalist and advanced generalist is presented. There is agreement regarding the generalist foundation of MSW education. There is less agreement, however, regarding what constitutes advanced, and the advanced generalist. The proposed conceptual model outlines what advanced generalist practice looks like, and what should be considered in teaching it.

The future of social work requires that we prepare students for unique, fluid, and complex situations. We must provide a framework for advanced practice so that our graduates have a conceptual lens through which they can identify and focus their interventions in a way that fosters innovative problem solving while being mindful of competing values and conflicting ethical principles, part of the landscape of professional practice. As will be discussed, the preparation of the advanced generalist involves: multi-dimensional problem setting, leadership and self-reflection, and ethical advocacy. These characteristics will be discussed as they relate to a definition of advanced generalist practice. As will be argued, this area of concentration most closely resembles the advanced practitioner who is well equipped to meet future challenges and assume a leadership role in advancing the profession.
Relevant to this discussion, it is useful to explore how other practice models have evolved in the past. For example, generalist practice was initially a heuristically appealing model because it reflected the realities of professional practice, but was lacking a well-defined conceptual base (McMahon, 1994). Eventually, the profession arrived at some consensus regarding generalist practice and its appropriateness for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs and MSW foundation curricula (Gibbs & Locke, 1990; Raymond & Atherton, 1991). A background in generalist practice prepared case managers and other baccalaureate level agency-based social workers. Less has been written, however, about the conceptual and practical basis for the advanced generalist. With an exploration of advanced generalist practice, a definitional clarification of “advanced” and a conceptual model of this area of practice are presented.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: GENERALIST VERSUS SPECIALIST

Historically, all MSW programs claim at least one area of specialization in their programming. Traditionally, distinctions were made according to fields of practice (e.g. children, families, policy, etc.) and methods of practice (e.g. clinical, community organization). The Curriculum Policy Statement of 1988 included the advanced generalist as one of the options for MSW concentrations. Its suitability as an area of concentration was discussed as part of the debate on the BSW to MSW continuum (Biggerstaff, 1980; Gibbs & Locke, 1990; Gross, 1992; Hoffman, 1992; Kolevzon, 1983, 1992; York, Denton, & Moran, 1990).

To summarize, the discourse on the undergraduate-graduate continuum addressed conceptual issues relative to the definitions of generalist and advanced practice. Some argued against the viability of generalist practice from academic and professional perspectives, while others sought a compromise in its role as foundational content for graduate programs. The debate regarding the shared generalist curriculum of the BSW degree and the MSW foundation became a moot point; the implementation of a planned overlap between the undergraduate social work program and the MSW foundation curriculum ended the discussion.

Pertinent to the current discussion, however, is the consensus reached on several points related to advanced concentrations. Specifically:

1. A definition of advanced proved to be problematic regardless of concentration or area of specialization. In a circular kind of logic, a specialization was deemed to be advanced because specialization could only exist in the advanced portion of the curriculum. This definitional and conceptual conundrum persists.

2. MSW specialization choice was not reflected in the job realities of graduates (Raymond, Teare, & Atherton, 1996; York, Denton, & Moran,
Only a portion of graduates was employed in their area of graduate specialization.

3. There was, and continues to be, a call for better integration of curricular areas, across micro, mezzo, and macro domains. In fact, advanced generalist practice appeared most reflective of the professional realities of MSW graduates (Raymond & Teare, 1996). As succinctly summarized by GlenMaye, Lewandowski, and Bolin (2004), “… in the real world of practice, social workers are incorporating an advanced generalist perspective, but without specification of a model” (p. 118).

Although the need for and legitimacy of advanced practice is well supported, definitions of advanced continue to be elusive, particularly as it refers to the generalist. How can one become an enhanced version of the entry-level generalist? What aspects of the generalist are developed to fuller complexity and refinement in a comparison of the BSW graduate and the MSW advanced version of generalist? Does advanced refer to a greater presence of some attributes, or to a different set of characteristics? The research indicates that, functionally, BSW workers are engaged in different tasks and responsibilities in comparison with their MSW counterparts (York et al., 1990). Therefore, the workplace confirms that graduate education makes a difference. Our curricula, however, have been less discerning. The MSW foundation, like the BSW curriculum, is generalist. What, in addition to generalist content, does a competent and potentially autonomously functioning professional need to know, or need to know how to do, in order to fulfill the mission of the profession? Exploration of the criteria of an advanced curriculum can provide insight into what makes an area of concentration an appropriate offering for MSW students who have completed a generalist foundation.

The various iterations of the Curriculum Policy Statement outline, in almost prescriptive fashion, required foundational content. Advanced content is left up to the program to determine in response to the unique mission of the university, the program, and the needs of the community. The definition of advanced becomes problematic because discussions usually frame knowledge and skills for advanced practice as content to be mastered. A more fruitful line of inquiry may be, “How do successful advanced practitioners function?” as opposed to, “What do they need to know as graduate-prepared practitioners?” Our best answer to the definitional quandaries regarding advanced and advanced generalist may be found in an exploration and analysis of the experienced and competent professional. Working backward, what lessons can be learned from skilled and seasoned professionals? This line of investigation is particularly relevant given the fact that experienced social work practitioners often evolve into advanced generalists (GlenMaye et al., 2004). For example, clinicians are concerned about and address larger issues that affect their ability to deliver direct
services, i.e. managed care, licensure. Organizational administrators or planners become acutely aware of the impact of macro level policy decisions on individuals and families, e.g. legislative budgets' effect on services to children. The better we are able to assess definitional and conceptual issues relative to professional practice, the better our curricula can prepare practitioners.

IN SEARCH OF AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF PRACTICE: THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Inquiry into the epistemology of practice asks about the kind of knowing, rather than the specific methodologies, that competent and effective practice demonstrates. The conceptual framework for advanced generalist practice reflects an epistemology of practice knowledge that honors and builds upon the “knowing and doing” of the experienced generalist—the essence of advanced generalist practice. It is assumed that good practitioners often know more than they are able to articulate. A great deal of that knowing comes from the ability to sort through unique, ambiguous, value-laden, and complex situations. The best practitioners demonstrate their competence by restructuring such situations in order to use existing methodologies. They are able to choose among competing paradigms because of their ability to “convert problematic situations to a problem” to be solved (Schon, 1983, p. 40). As will be described, this ability to tolerate the ambiguous and complex can give rise to innovative responses and solutions. A problematic situation can be reframed in a way that permits application of known intervention strategies. This is not the same as a practitioner who uses the same intervention technique with all clients; instead, the creative and often seasoned practitioner appreciates the uniqueness of a given problem and is comfortable using a variety of approaches rather than that which is most familiar. With experience comes confidence in addressing the unexpected or novel.

Therefore, an epistemology of practice suggests that professional education focus on dynamic engagement with problematic circumstances, rather than an emphasis on mastery of content. Professional education should prepare problem-solvers who can be simultaneously innovative and grounded; they are creative and open to new possibilities, and well-informed by the profession’s existing base of knowledge. It is in this type and intensity of engagement that the meaning of advanced can be found. This article suggests that advanced practice, in general, and advanced generalist, in particular, most closely mirror the thinking and actions of the experienced worker. We are aware that MSW graduates must be prepared to address a variety of problems across multiple systems in ways that may be unknown to us now. Our curricula are tasked with identifying and then
teaching those elements that best emulate a competent and experienced professional. Professional education traditionally focuses on mastery of discrete areas of knowledge; this approach, however, may not be well suited to the rapidly changing and ambiguous nature of practice.

…professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice, the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice. (Schon, 1983, p. 14)

Information, in multiple forms from numerous sources, for understanding, conceptualizing, and addressing problems has grown exponentially. In response to an overwhelming amount of data, we continue to think of adding course content or a new class a solution for incorporating new information in the curriculum. For example, international and global perspectives are a relatively recent addition to MSW programs. A tradition of national chauvinism needs to be corrected, just as sexism, heterosexism, and racism were addressed in the past. Issues such as immigration, national security, and wars inextricably linked to religion require that we modify how we think about social work practice. Framing this broader scope as new content to be included in the curriculum may not always be feasible or helpful. Instead, advanced practice must address how assessment and intervention should proceed in increasingly complex and novel situations.

Advanced generalist practice is well suited to the direction of social services in an uncertain future. As McMahon (1994) noted:

Advanced generalist practice is an emerging model of global awareness and integrated methodology that promotes commitment, confidence and competence for social workers to face emerging issues and problems as we move into the year 2000 and beyond. (p. 238)

This article suggests that practice in such an environment is facilitated by curricula that address three key elements of advanced generalist practice. These elements reflect the advanced nature of practice now and into the future: multidimensional problem setting, leadership and self-reflection, and ethical advocacy.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL ASSESSMENT: PROBLEM SETTING
Advanced practice requires multiple skills, a strategy for selecting among them various alternatives, and creativity to address complex practice issues. If improvement of societal well-being is our overarching goal, how do we most efficaciously subdivide this rather overwhelming objective into its component parts while paying attention to the whole? To which problem(s)
or subsystems of functioning should our attentions be directed? What methodologies should be taught to achieve our stated goals and promote professional values? And, which client groups should be represented in our teaching? Questions regarding which pieces get included in our programs presuppose that with enough pieces the puzzle can be solved. This focus may be misplaced: emphasis is directed on what areas students should master as opposed to what strategic processes they should be taught. Advanced generalist practice is guided by epistemological thinking about processes relevant to practice. One typically thinks of advanced generalist practice as multisystemic. One can argue, however, that this is true for all social work education; all curricula address micro, mezzo, and macro issues and solutions. There are distinctions, however, between the multiple systems that a clinician assesses and the multidimensional strategies and framework of the advanced generalist.

The multisystemic nature of advanced generalist practice has less to do with data collection, assessment, and intervention in solving problems of various subsystems and more to do with the boundaries of practice that are assumed apriori without methodological prejudice. How the practitioner locates the focus for intervention becomes as, if not more, important as actually solving the problem.

...professional practice has at least as much to do with finding the problem as with solving the problem found, it is also true that problem setting (italics added) is a recognized professional activity. (Schon, p. 18)

In other words, professional specialization runs the risk of presupposing the problem to be found. Direct practitioners, for example, identify and solve client problems from a micro practice perspective. More simply stated, if we give students a hammer, then everything will look like a nail. The advanced generalist is likely to utilize multidimensional strategies and tactics by virtue of a reticence to locate problems too quickly from a relatively narrow frame of reference. Such multidimensionality refers not only to micro, mezzo, and macro subsystems, but also to the historical and future time dimensions inherent to any human endeavor. We are not only interested in the client’s history because it may give us a glimpse of the future, but we are interested in the trajectory of past to future because it holds the key to prevention. Our client’s case helps us with the larger cause.

The integration of theory and practice, across micro, mezzo, and macro perspectives allows us, along with our students, to better see the gaps. The universe for problem setting is broadened, and by implication, so is the potential for creativity and innovation. This is in marked contrast to previous work on defining advanced generalist practice in which advanced refers to increased knowledge to address complex problems, and increased skills (Schatz & Jenkins, 1987). The notion of advanced generalist as more of
generalist is problematic because the lack of integrative themes and integrating pedagogy is perpetuated.

LEADERSHIP AND REFLECTION: THE INNOVATIVE PRACTITIONER

The profession is facing a shortage of leaders, both in academia and practice. Leaders are needed to advance the profession and its cause of social justice and societal well-being in the 21st century. If we are unable to educate future leaders, then we run the risk of being lead by those outside of social work (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). Leaders are needed who can act according to professional values, while staying mindful of the needs of colleagues and clients. Political advocacy, interpersonal acumen, and an eye for creative problem solving are all critical skills (Rank & Hutchison, 2000).

These desired attributes are described elsewhere as the “reflective practitioner” (Schon, 1983), and this concept is central to advanced generalist practice. A reflective practitioner, who is able to deal with unique, ambiguous, unstable and complex situations fraught with value conflicts, resonates with real world practice needs. The reflective practitioner refers to a capable professional, rather than a particular specialization of practice. Advanced generalist practice strives to educate this kind of advanced practitioner. The focus of reflection, however, is not one of personal introspection as some have advocated as pedagogy to advance social change (Coates & McKay, 1995; Friere, 1970). Although personal analysis of one’s values, biases, and connections to the problems shared with clients can be profoundly important to learning, the “advanced” of advanced generalist practice has more to do with the ability to reflect in an ongoing or regular manner on the fit between one’s theoretical models, methods, and their effectiveness to produce the desired change. Advanced generalist practice is less bound by a particular methodological or theoretical approach, and instead is situated to generate unique responses to a given dilemma faced by the practitioner.

Analogous to the seasoned artist, teacher, or professional, the ability to refine one’s theory-in-action captures the essence of this reflective stance. The advanced professional with a generalist’s array of methods and skills, is most comfortable when challenged by the unique attributes of presenting problem. In this way, accomplished practitioners circumvent burn-out because they avoid routinizing their practice. Their methodological choices are eclectic, yet grounded in careful consideration of theoretical assumptions. Such reflection-in-action requires knowledge in action:

A practitioner’s reflection can serve as a corrective to over learning. Through reflection, he (sic) can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of
specialized practice, and can make sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience. (Schon, 1983, p. 61)

In this manner, the routine is questioned; its relevance is examined in light of the outlier—the unique. It is in this unsolved problem that innovation is borne. For example, some traditionally trained clinicians may label as “resistant” or “in denial” the client for whom a particular strategy is not working. An advanced generalist may, instead, re-assess and possibly move to another point of entry in a multidimensional assessment. This may include the selected treatment approach, the agency’s policies for accessing and structuring services, or the community’s referral network.

Reflection in practice is how professionals respond creatively to the new, or the unique—the problem that is not easily solved with traditional or time-honored strategies. As Healy (2005) notes, “It is critical that we understand the specific historical and geographical conditions that give rise to specific theories. … theories for practice provide a, rather than the, base for professional practice” (p. 11). Social workers often experience tension between the need to select proven, evidence-based methods in contrast with trying something new to address long-standing issues that may not respond well to standard ways of intervening. It seems that we remain unduly loyal to methods and theories in our academic settings. A cursory review of popular textbooks presents an array of theories and models with little variation. Academicians are, paradoxically, slow to change and yet the first to identify the need for innovation.

The reflective and analytical process provides fertile ground for creativity and the potential for new and unconventional approaches (Leavy, 2005). A habit of thinking about one’s “doing,” and then letting the results of our actions inform our knowledge building leads to a vibrant profession that continually revitalizes itself. Its relevance and professional stature are more likely to be maintained when this kind of feedback loop is in place.

Central to all of these arguments is a call to move away from a primary emphasis on acquisition of cognitive understanding through isolated courses that focus on objectively verifiable knowledge. The advanced quality of advanced generalist practice requires knowing-in-action and reflection, rather than accumulation of information. When content is better integrated, students are more likely to generate hypothetical postures when faced with complex situations. As has been discussed, creative problem solving has more to do the frame used to set the problem rather than the amount of data one has to ameliorate it. As described by Grudin in his work on creativity,
This conceptual link between freedom and creativity is a prerequisite to transformational leadership roles that are possible from an advanced generalist framework. When the worker is not bound to prescribed methods, but instead, is encouraged to think broadly and act according to core values, then creative problem-solving is facilitated.

ETHICAL ADVOCACY

Advanced practitioners are aware that all practice is value-based and involves consideration of ethics. The skilled advanced generalist may be more purposeful, however, in promoting justice-seeking interventions due to the multidimensionality of their problem-setting and a self-reflective stance. When the big picture is part of the frame, future implications as well as current circumstances are included, and the possible outcomes grow exponentially. With a wider gaze that includes systems through time, it is more apparent that one’s interventive strategies have consequences for social justice and social change. If the worker must ultimately be accountable to a set of values rather than a methodology preference, then unintended consequences of an intervention can be better tracked, and the promotion of social work’s core values can be enhanced. In fact, promotion of social justice is best practice. Social justice is broadly defined here as greater access to resources by groups and individuals who experienced barriers to such access. When an ethical screen is at the center of intervention strategies, across all levels, access to social justice may be facilitated.

Attention to values and ethics is central to advanced practice, rather than the “glitch” or ethical dilemma encountered along the way to resolution. All of our practice decisions, on any level, reflect potential ethical dilemmas and compromises. With a wider frame and greater attention to problem framing practitioners can avoid the social change versus social control dilemma that so often pulls social workers in public agencies. If our professional mission requires that we advance social change, but the demands of agency life risk transforming the worker into an agent of social control, e.g., a “paper-pushing bureaucrat,” then an education that focuses on value conflicts and an appreciation of the uniqueness of each situation is critical.

The advanced professional, “…conscious of a dilemma, may attribute it to the way in which he (sic) has set his problem, or even to the way in which he set his role” (Schon, 1983, p. 63). The centrality of an ethical frame is an important feature of advanced generalist practice. Dodd and Jansson (2004) suggest that we expand ethical education to include ethical advocacy. This expanded view of how we teach and operationalize our ethical standards
should seek to ensure that those in positions of power hear our ethical deliberations on the part of the client. This is in keeping with a view of practice that is directed toward social transformation and social justice. The need to give voice to these ethical concerns is also related to an advanced generalist practice and leadership and self-reflection.

How goals are achieved and what happens within among and between people as they work together, is as important as the goals themselves. Personal and social transformation can only be achieved by attending to how people work together and by developing methods that are congruent with progressive values and vision. In other words, how we get there is just as important as where we are going. (Coates & McKay, 1995, p. 32)

Value driven work necessitates use of a multidimensional frame. How can one approach a system, assess the potential for ethical quandaries, and not look at the multiple locations of those potential dilemmas and conflicts? A new policy or a new treatment all have value based issues associated with their implementation. Discussion of how one strategizes across ethical terrain is a central tenet of advanced generalist practice. Paradoxically, with more attention to multidimensionality, and restraint from rushing to intervene, the advanced practitioner is more likely to be seen as a leader for change. Workers without this type of advanced perspective risk seeing themselves as skilled technicians delivering services; the advanced generalist can instead be a catalyst for transformation. This type of practitioner will keep the mission of the profession central, and will practice in a way that demonstrates greater ease in addressing new situations and reframing difficult problems in a manner that permits innovation.

Although rhetorically weak perhaps, advanced generalist practice presents conceptual strength as a framework to address clients’ real problems in their full-complexity including ambiguous mandates from agencies and funding sources in a rapidly changing environment. The potential for creative, multidimensional tactics needs to be more fully explored as the framework’s theoretical underpinnings are put into place. Furthermore, as curricula are developed and revised to address the advanced change-oriented professional, then a body of socially valid, applied research will also help capture the essence of this growing area of practice. It is suggested that a professional with a multidimensional perspective, prepared to take the lead in innovation, may be well positioned to advance the cause of social justice given the advanced attributes described here.

CONCLUSION

Those involved in teaching advanced generalist practice are, for the most part, trained in more traditional social work methods (i.e. clinical social
work, policy). And yet, experience suggests that most social workers become advanced generalists over time. Perhaps that is why we have been able to proceed with creating curricula in spite of the lack of a conceptual model. We believe that we know it when we see it, and it resembles the way an experienced worker thinks and functions. The purpose of this article is to present some of the essential and unique elements of advanced generalist practice—in the classroom and in the field. Additionally, examination of the epistemology of advanced practice helps to develop frameworks for understanding the dynamic interplay between knowing and doing, and between the profession and the academy. The advanced generalist is prepared to address emerging issues, to deal with the complexity of ethical dilemmas, and to initiate innovative solutions. It is hoped that future research will continue to enrich our understanding of advanced practice and the nature of learning to support professional success.

REFERENCES


