

A Call to Action: Domestic Violence Education in Social Work

Sonya Crabtree-Nelson, Susan F. Grossman, and Marta Lundy



The purpose of this commentary is to highlight the unique position of social work researchers, educators, and practitioners to educate current students and veteran social workers regarding domestic violence history, current research implications, and practice interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence continues to affect our communities at an alarming rate. Research indicates that one in every three women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime (M. C. Black et al., 2011). On average, women experience 2 million injuries from domestic violence each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Risk is greatest for women living in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Benson & Fox, 2004) and for younger women who are between the ages of 16 and 24 (Rand, 2009). Given these statistics, one can almost guarantee that social workers will come into contact with those affected by domestic violence. Although social work educators and professionals have continued to address the issues surrounding domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Collins & Dressler, 2008; Danis, 2003; Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Postmus, McMahon, Warrener, & Macri, 2011; Warrener, Postmus, & McMahon, 2013), social work students continue to graduate with a lack of foundational knowledge regarding how to properly assess and assist those affected by domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2007; B. M. Black, Weisz, & Bennett, 2010). It is imperative that social work educators and professionals address this lack of knowledge to ensure that social workers are providing comprehensive and effective services to survivors of domestic violence.

HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MOVEMENT

The profession of social work and the domestic violence field have had a somewhat disparate relationship throughout the past several decades. Various social workers grounded in feminist and social justice frameworks have highlighted the history of this connection on numerous occasions (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Danis, 2003; Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Postmus et al., 2011; Pyles & Postmus, 2004; Robbins, 2014; Warrener et al., 2013). Social workers are aware that domestic violence is an issue that affects a myriad of clients. In fact, 92 percent of social workers state that they have had contact with domestic violence victims (Danis, 2003), and, overall, there is evidence that social workers continue to increase their understanding and ability to assess and intervene when clients present with domestic violence issues (Chanmugam, 2014; Danis, 2003; Pyles & Postmus, 2004; Warrener et al., 2013). However, it is concerning that a profession grounded in social justice continues to struggle with educating new social workers on the patriarchal and hierarchical power-imbalanced relationships that are the underpinnings of domestic violence. Even more concerning is that social workers continue to lack a cohesive model of practice interventions and an in-depth understanding of how to best assist low-income women, women of color, immigrant women, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) population when they experience domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Messing, Ward-Lasher, Thaller, & Bagwell-Gray, 2015; Pyles & Postmus, 2004).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, RESEARCH, AND THE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

The need for current information on domestic violence and appropriate interventions has been underscored in the literature (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Bussey, 2008; Danis, 2003; LeGeros & Savage, 2012; Messing et al., 2015; Postmus et al., 2011). However, it appears that only a small percentage of graduating MSW students are aware of specific interventions for domestic violence (B. M. Black et al., 2010).

Social workers connect with individuals, families, and communities affected by domestic violence even when their setting is not a domestic violence agency, and it is imperative that social workers are equipped with a theoretical understanding of the complexities of domestic violence as well as basic skills for assessment and intervention, for example, danger assessment, safety planning, and resource connection. They should also be aware of interventions that are not advisable when abuse is present, such as couples counseling and relying on family members as interpreters. Because of the complexities of domestic violence issues for client systems and the multiple circumstances of the clients that social workers serve, intersectionality may provide a helpful framework for understanding and assisting survivors of domestic violence (Arnold & Ake, 2013; Messing et al., 2015). *Intersectionality* as a theoretical framework identifies the “intersection of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” (Davis, 2008, p. 67; see also Shields, 2008) and, as such, may be a particularly useful lens for social workers. To narrow the gap between domestic violence research and practice, social work educators, researchers, and clinicians have an opportunity and responsibility to work together to ensure that students and experienced social workers are receiving a solid foundation and updated intervention strategies for work with domestic violence survivors.

SOCIAL WORKERS AS LEADERS IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION

Social workers are uniquely positioned to be leaders in the research, education, and practice of domestic violence history and intervention. The premise of starting where the client is and empowering clients by recognizing and maximizing their strengths dovetails with the individual needs of

domestic violence survivors. In addition, the mandate for social justice advocacy positions the profession to ensure that new and experienced social workers are abreast of the underpinnings of domestic violence and the interventions needed to serve the myriad of survivors who are affected.

At times there appears to be a disconnection between the innovative ideas and offerings of research and the application of these ideas in practice (LeGeros & Savage, 2012; Postmus et al., 2011; Pyles & Postmus, 2004). Social workers can lead the way by continuing to research, develop, and disseminate effective domestic violence interventions. Currently, many domestic violence researchers state that now is the time to ensure we are delivering specific, cost-effective intervention options for the diverse array of domestic violence survivors including immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and aging adults (Bent-Goodley, 2004, 2005; Ely, 2004; Fuchsel, Murphy, & Dufresne, 2012; Mears & Visser, 2005; Messing et al., 2015; Postmus et al., 2011). The presence of the abuse of men also has received greater awareness in the literature and needs to be discussed and addressed with social work practitioners (Haegerich, & Hall, 2011; Hester, 2012; Kimmel, 2002). Social workers can work together to ensure that both new and seasoned workers are equipped with the tools and interventions identified from the expanding research base in the evolving field of domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

It has been over 10 years since social workers who were working with survivors of domestic violence and conducting research in the area issued a call to their colleagues to lead the way in addressing the issue of domestic violence and to intervene accordingly. Let us act now. The social work profession is poised to ensure that we are educating all of our workers on the history and prevalence of domestic violence as well as how to appropriately connect clients to resources, options, and appropriate intervention strategies. **SW**

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Sonya Crabtree-Nelson, PhD, LCSW, is assistant professor, Department of Social Work, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, DePaul University, 1 East Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60604; e-mail: scrabtr3@depaul.edu. **Susan F. Grossman, PhD**, is professor and interim dean and **Marta Lundy, PhD, LCSW**, is professor, School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago.

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