

CHAPTER 2*

“But How Do I Know It’s a Good Source?”

Authority is Constructed in Social Work Practice

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Social workers, like librarians, tend to be a skeptical bunch. Social workers serve in a variety of professional roles ranging from therapists to program directors to human resources managers. Regardless of the setting in which a social worker is employed, they are often required to make important clinical or policy decisions. On a micro, or clinical level, social workers often have to determine the best treatment model for their clients. Some decisions clinical social workers need to make are: Given what the client is suffering from and the client’s own dispositions and beliefs, what are the best approaches for treatment? Which types of clinical settings, such as in-patient programs, group therapy, or school-based programs, are going to have the greatest impact? On a macro, or community-level, social workers may help to make policy decisions about wellness and mental health initiatives, such as low-cost health care clinics, low-income housing, or recreation activities. Some decisions social workers in the policy sector may need to make are: Which resources are their communities lacking? Who are the important constituents or stakeholders? What laws exist to help or hinder the initiative?

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When making these decisions, social workers employ an evidence-based practice (EBP) approach. The social work EBP approach has its roots in other clinical and practitioner-based professions like medicine and nursing. This approach advocates decision-making as a conversation among the practitioner's expertise, the dispositions of the client or community of focus, and, of course, research evidence. For social workers, these decisions have potential real and lasting impact on what are often underrepresented or marginalized communities. EBP educators encourage burgeoning social workers to ask: "Whose evidence and for what purpose?"¹ Social workers understand that even a highly evaluated or widely recognized treatment model won't be appropriate for all clients, and that any evidence-based decision must be contextualized within the client's sociopolitical realities. For librarians teaching in the social work discipline, engaging students in that "whose evidence skepticism" is the forefront of much research instruction. In particular, the Authority is Constructed and Contextual information literacy frame bridges library research strategies and social work ethos.

The University of Southern California's (USC) School of Social Work is a heavily evidence-based program, designed to prepare students to be able to judiciously locate, assess, and employ evidence on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of decision making. Indeed, the Council on Social Work Education "recognizes that teaching social work students how to access, analyze, interpret, and appropriately employ evidence is critical to effective social work practice."² Interestingly—for both social workers and librarians—what the profession considers "best evidence" is highly dependent on a number of factors, including, unsurprisingly, the methodology used to generate that evidence. As indicated by models like the hierarchy of evidence,³ EBP practitioners recognize that not all research evidence constitutes "best evidence." The hierarchy of evidence is a pyramid to visually represent methodologies that provide the strongest evidentiary case for clinical decision-making. This model visualizes that for most social science research, so-called filtered research methodologies—like meta analyses and systematic reviews—provide "stronger" evidence than, say, qualitative studies.⁴ So while students are prompted to consider the source of the evidence, who published it, where it was published, the purpose or use of the evidence, and how the evidence was generated, they are also being told that their professional expertise and clients' dispositions matter, too. This paradox forms the basis for the paradox of social work education. It should be noted that EBP generally, and the hierarchy of evidence specifically, is contested in the field of social work. One argument against a heavy focus on systematic reviews and meta-analyses is that it privileges one kind of knowledge over another—namely, academic, quantitatively gathered evidence. The argument goes that EBP privileges research above clients, and that perhaps a better term for EBP is instead "research sup-

ported."⁵ Nevertheless, the School of Social Work, where the authors of this chapter work, is an EBP program training EBP practitioners, with issues of community representation in research literature woven throughout the curriculum.

In traditional models of primary and secondary education, students are taught to yield to professional literature and/or "expert" opinions, as well as synthesize these arguments into their own argument. However, in the context of social work practice, students will use their own professional expertise and opinions to diagnose and develop a treatment plan for patients, instead of simply consulting traditional evidence and research published in peer-reviewed journals. Unlike their colleagues in medicine, social workers predicate treatment plans on a combination of traditional research interventions, client preferences, and cultural ethics.⁶ In particular, social work education unravels and exposes the political underpinnings of "systems that grant authority, including their faults, along with considerations of when, where, and why these systems are used."⁷ Social work education provides a rich backdrop for understanding how authority of evidence is a situational, contextual, and, indeed, political negotiation.⁸

When information literacy educators are grappling with the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame, we are mostly speaking to an information source's cognitive authority (as opposed to political or administrative). Cognitive authority refers to the believability of a source based on who the source is. Simply put, some information is more credible than others simply because the person who told you "knows what they're talking about."⁹ Unlike, say, political authority, cognitive authority is concerned with a source's "trust and credibility,"¹⁰ as well as reputation of the source. As Wilkinson points out, authority in this context is not synonymous with expertise, though "authorities [sometimes] obtain their credibility by being experts or reliable sources for knowledge."¹¹ The distinction between cognitive authority and other authorities is crucial. Social work educators, and the librarians who work with them, want students to recognize that "unlikely voices can be authoritative," and that students "are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area."¹² Social workers trained in EBP thinking come to understand that source authority is a mediation between evidentiary (how the source was produced and by who) and experiential (what the practitioner knows about their client) spheres of knowledge.

When we first familiarized ourselves with the Framework, the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame immediately seemed like there would be a clear connection between the dispositions therein and the type of research social work students do. Evidence-based practice work requires students to "evaluate [information sources] based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used."¹³ What we took for

granted, though, is just how troubling the terms “authority” and “contextual” truly are. Indeed, it has been quite a struggle to reorient our teaching practices away from strictly scholarly, peer-reviewed sources and not just for us, but for teaching faculty, too. If authority is constructed and contextual, does that mean anything goes? The transformative and troublesome nature of the threshold concept within the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame seemingly operates in opposition to the constructed and contextual nature of evidence-based practice.

The librarians in this program grapple with teaching “that some kinds of expertise are more worthy than others without privileging certain sources of knowledge.”¹⁴ In fact, the term “evidence” itself presents its own problematic connotations. If experts are expected to “remain skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it,” how do we reconcile the hierarchy of evidence, which asserts some ways of producing knowledge are better than others, with the understanding that many of the populations served by social workers do not, and may never have, peer-reviewed, meta-analytical research about them? In fact, this incongruity illuminates the troublesome nature of the threshold concept, as well as general lamentations that have surrounded this frame from its conception: “Novices may understand evidence and authority as unchangeable and can struggle to relate their own use of evidence in daily life to scholarly or professional approaches to evidence.”¹⁵ Clearly defining what constitutes evidence in social work practice to new MSW students sets their standards for defining their research methods throughout their program.

It is important to distinguish between authority and expertise when considering evidence-based practice in social work research. One of the central critiques of this frame, at least initially, was the conflation of authority with expertise.¹⁶ For example, community stakeholders, such as civic leaders, may have the highest credibility and historical understanding of a community. This credibility naturally lends itself to authority. Often, students look toward such authoritative members of a community during their community tours in order to gain historical insight to synthesize with demographic information in their papers. But authority is not the same as expertise and, as the frame explains, “Experts understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community. Experts view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought.”¹⁷ Experts have specific, concrete knowledge bases; authoritative beings have credibility within a sphere of influence.¹⁸ In this example with community stakeholders, these leaders are authoritative sources of information because they have influence recognized within a community, but these stakeholders are not necessarily experts. Distinguishing these characteristics in knowledge practices is

challenging, but nevertheless a good exercise is understanding authority in scholarship and communities.

In addition, the concept of authority is laced with many political and social problems. For example, the widely used Beck Depression Inventory is considered one of the premier authoritative tools for measuring depression, but has real limitations. The original sample upon which BDI-II was developed was largely Caucasian and greatly misrepresentative of the United States population, as well as many other countries. Additionally, the inventory fails to recognize factors that determine how other cultural groups might experience depression. It is therefore up to the social worker to determine if this inventory is an appropriate measure for their client.¹⁹

About the USC School of Social Work

The USC School of Social Work is deeply committed to introducing students to a contextual, evidence-based way of thinking about information, as evidenced in a curriculum update. The School recently implemented new foundation curriculum based on updated Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) standards. The new curriculum “places a stronger emphasis on the science of social work and leadership” and “reflects feedback from employers and alumni, who cite a need for additional training in analyzing results, thinking critically about complex problems, embracing and managing increasing demands for accountability and data-informed decision-making, budgeting, effectively collaborating with colleagues across settings and institutions and with professionals trained in other disciplines....”²⁰ The heart of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education is in accepting that “students have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically.”²¹ Thus, critical thinking, data-based decision-making, and steering through the structures and understanding the purposes of information, as implicated by the new CSWE standards, align with many of the tenets of information literacy. From the beginning of this program, students engage with a myriad of both scholarly and popular resources to refine their knowledge of social work principles and trends. Students are also tasked with identifying authoritative sources upon their entry into the program during the School’s welcome week. This skill is reinforced during their foundation year courses (i.e., first-year courses), during which students must compare and assimilate an author’s arguments into the findings of other sources, articulate their own argument, and evaluate sources.

In one such foundation-year course, SOWK 536: Policy and Advocacy in Professional Social Work (SOWK 536), students engage with contextual

authority in their first assignment, a community immersion research paper. This paper builds on students' experiences touring an assigned community in Los Angeles before the first week of class. They are expected to merge these experiences with the scholarly, popular, and anecdotal sources that describe the socio-economic and political underpinnings of each community. Rather than merely documenting their experiences in each community, students are expected to synthesize their original conclusions with the documented findings of traditional sources of information, such as government resources, newspapers, and scholarly journal articles. In addition, the assignment instructions urge students to come to a conclusion of how well (or not) their communities function, supported by evidence they have uncovered during their research. The assignment prompt encourages students to compare and contrast how their perceptions of the community differ from published research on the areas. Students are also encouraged to share only the data they believe to be most important or representative of their communities.

In this particular assignment, because students are expected to develop an analysis of a community based on many different types of information from a variety of sources, they demonstrate their ability to "define different types of authority," "use... indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources," recognize the sometimes informal nature of authoritative content, acknowledge their own expertise in an area of the social work discipline, and "understand the increasingly social nature of the information ecosystem."²² They also begin to determine the utility of and/or bias within each source. Because this is the first assignment in a foundation-year course students complete within their first semester of the program, students must rely on their own conceptions of authority and expertise, as well as the librarians' presentations of authority and expertise, including an explanation of the discrepancies between the two. The Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame helps to explain the convoluted nature of this process, which "includes points of disagreement where debate and dialogue work to deepen the conversations around knowledge"²³ and, thus, aligns with the learning objectives and outcomes of this course.

The student learning outcomes for this course complement many frames well, but they complement the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame particularly effectively. One core competency for this course is critical thinking, wherein students are expected to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments and the related student learning outcome indicates students will "distinguish, integrate, and appraise multiple sources of knowledge."²⁴ The onus is on the librarians to help students understand that all reputable sources, regardless of type, use evidence, but each uses such evidence in different ways. Though the assignment description does not explicitly make connections to evidence-based practice, the fact

that this is an inaugural assignment in a heavily EBP-focused program is apparent. Throughout the assignment, students are encouraged to use research evidence to make connections between issues facing their communities of focus to epidemiological data, or potential interventions. The expectation to weave research evidence into a community analysis introduces students to the complexity of evidence-based practice in that students need to "appraise multiple sources of knowledge" within the context of a specific community. The following section outlines how the social work librarians address this task in our instruction sessions.

What we do

The School has two librarians embedded into its program—one on-campus and one distance librarian. The librarians supplement these library sessions with course-integrated tutorials and videos. One-shot sessions are offered on a voluntary basis to the approximately sixty-seven course sections; most, but not all, sections receive in-class library instruction. In addition to the tutorials and videos, the librarians recorded a lecture for students whose instructors do not opt into library instruction.

Each library instruction session focuses on how to use evidence in the community immersion paper. For example, the librarians explain that finding a peer-reviewed article about their specific community is unlikely and that, in fact, finding location-specific scholarly information isn't necessary for the assignment. Instead, it is more likely that students will find articles pertaining to topics that can be applied to their communities, such as the connections between violent crime and availability of social service centers or food deserts and the number of children who receive free/reduced lunches. In social work parlance, the librarians emphasize that peer-reviewed information is helpful for macro-level analysis, whereas location-specific information is often used for micro-level analysis. The librarians also focus on introducing students to evidence-based practice, which is a tenet of social work research. Although the program also includes a course solely focused on evidence-based practice, and many students opt to enroll in that class concurrently with SOWK 536, students must demonstrate an aptitude for illuminating consistencies or discrepancies between published research and their opinions of the communities they study.

The librarians also highlight the fact that a source's reputability depends on how it will be used. For example, a community organizer may be the most authoritative voice in a community and may provide incisive historical commentary that will not be found in a journal article or other scholarly sources. Or, if such commentary is found in a scholarly source, students must analyze

the power structures inherent in traditional media sources during certain times throughout history. Thus, informal, first-person commentary from a community organizer who has lived in a community for decades may lend credence to a particular argument or, at the very least, provide important context to accounts in traditional media sources. This opens the floor for conversations about the way privilege influences the perception of a source's perceived authority.²⁵

Methods of teaching the frame

The librarians discovered that one major source of anxiety for students is distinguishing between reputable and non-reputable sources. Unsurprisingly, many students simply want to know the best sources to use and frequently ask the librarians, “But how do I know if my source is good?” To be able to help students through the Authority is Constructed frame, the librarians have to begin by framing popular and scholarly sources as equal (one is not necessarily better than the other) and explaining that they both serve different purposes. For example, while students might not find demographic research about their communities in library databases, they may find it in popular sources. In fact, specific information about their community, such as demographics and statistics, will likely be found in a popular source of information, such as a blog, city council website, or even a government resource, such as the United States Census Bureau's website. The librarians go on to explain the differences in purpose, authorship, audience, and availability between scholarly and popular sources. One analogy the librarians use is that so-called “popular sources” are used to answer the who, what, where, and when questions about a community (questions that are typically answered by demographic data and newspaper stories); whereas so-called “scholarly sources” are used to answer “so what?” or to make connections between those who-what-where-when questions. This distinction helps students recognize that peer-reviewed or scholarly works are not necessarily the most authoritative or appropriate source for every kind of question they'll ask.

Understanding authority as a construct largely depends on understanding its function. The audience of a blog is likely different than the audience of a scholarly journal article. Again, the librarians reiterate that a journal article is not necessarily “better” than a blog—it only serves a different purpose. From here, the librarians have the opportunity to introduce the conversation surrounding power structures inherent in typical scholarly publishing processes, which further contextualize the construct of authority. In particular, the librarians reiterate that many of the underrepresented, under-resourced communities they will often work with are not well included in traditional

scholarly publications. In those cases, looking at information produced by local or indigenous sources can be better than peer-reviewed scholarship.

The next step of the process involves the flow of information. The librarians explain that it is important for students to do some legwork when deciding which sources to include in their paper—that simply telling them which sources are best isn't straightforward. Sources should be written by a knowledgeable author, meaning one who is considered an authoritative source within the field of social work or who can otherwise authoritatively speak to a topic without bias. Also important is that the information found within should be corroborated with other sources. By demonstrating or discussing methods to corroborate information with other sources, the librarians offer a method for evaluating sources.

The next step involves identifying where information "lives." This is considered part of the nuts and bolts of the assignment, where students explain that popular sources of information are likely freely available, while many scholarly sources are paywalled behind library database subscriptions. This provides another opportunity to "identify authoritative information sources based on need."²⁶ To that end, the librarians developed a library guide for this assignment to provide students with a jumping-off point. In that guide are interactive tutorials we designed called "Knowing Where to Look" and "Evaluating Sources." These tutorials provide practice exercises where students begin to identify where to look for different types of information and how to evaluate the usefulness of information based on the information need and assignment requirements. Students are encouraged to complete these tutorials prior to the live sessions. Throughout the live sessions, we design activities to let students practice identifying where different types of information live in the information landscape. For online sessions, the librarian uses the Poll Pod in Adobe Connect to ask students to identify the most appropriate place to look for local crime statistics, population demographics, or research on the impact of gentrification. By highlighting that there is no "one right source" or place to look, students begin to realize the complexity and nuance of information-seeking for social work research. This understanding is highlighted in the learning activities; when we see that students disagree about where to look for, say, information about the effects of food insecurity, we encourage a discussion among those students until they reach a level of mutual understanding. Moreover, these exercises underscore that authority depends on much more than simply who wrote an article, but also on the function and use of that article. For example, when looking for information related to the number of veterans under the age of forty employed in a specific county, we advise students that the United States Department of Veteran Affairs or the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics websites are authoritative sources for this information, but they may also find pertinent information through local nonprofit veterans advocacy websites.

Conclusion

Shifting from a lesson plan primarily concerned with showing students library resources for their research to one where we encourage them to engage with the concepts in the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame is not without its obstacles. While restructuring our in-class sessions and digital learning objects to support the frame has brought increased engagement in our instruction among students, there were some challenges in working with social work faculty. Like most instruction librarians, we faced some resistance from social work faculty who simply wanted us to teach students where to go to get the resources they need. For some, talking about authority and the politics of publishing is outside the scope of what they're used to getting from librarians. The most effective approach for implementing this frame is through collaboration with, and education for, disciplinary faculty. Having frank conversations about their and our expectations for the session, as well as articulating how the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame (without necessarily calling it that by name) supports the learning objectives for the course, program, and discipline as a whole, especially as it relates to the training of evidence-based practitioners, can be beneficial. Often these conversations would start by asking faculty what they felt their students had a hard time grasping and going from there. The librarians would talk about the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame and the dispositions therein, and connect the language of the frame to the language instructors used to describe the sources their students used. Also, of course, for many instructors the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Shifting our focus away from simply instructing students where to go toward addressing how authority is constructed and contextual leads to better-researched, more nuanced papers, as indicated through our various channels of instructor feedback. Some of those channels include sitting in on the faculty meetings for instructors of the course, receiving midterm grade reports from student advisors, and simply asking instructors, once that first assignment has been graded, to reflect on the types of sources their students used.

When introducing any information literacy concept into a disciplinary arena, it is essential to connect the dispositions of that concept to the ethos of the discipline. For social workers, the need to be able to locate the best possible information for their clients is well aligned with the skills and dispositions brought on by thinking about authority in a contextual way. For a profession centered on EBP, the need to be able to critically investigate how authority, expertise, and evidence manifests in information sources is a crucial skill. Again, evidence-based social work practice demands that practitioners ask, "Whose evidence and for what purpose?" Our jobs as information literacy professionals is to equip students with the ability to ask—and answer—that

question. While evidence-based practice is not without its criticisms and limitations,²⁷ an EBP ethos of skepticism, interrogation, and sociopolitical contexts makes way for a bridge connecting a disciplinary practice to information literacy.

Notes

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