

Comparing Research Training of Social Workers in the USA and Western Europe: Ukrainian Perspective

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Abstract: The article studies how the USA and Western Europe organize research training of social workers, traces its key trends and analyzes the ways of organizing and motivating students towards such activities. By comparing and discovering common methodical trends in Europe and the USA, one can identify the practical experience Ukraine needs. The analysis of relevant scientific literature and teaching practice in higher education institutions abroad shows that the above-mentioned approaches are mostly associated with module-based learning in its various modifications. Its system-forming link is independent work of students, including research activities. At the same time, professional functions of university teachers shift towards determining general areas of specialist training (elaboration of module-based programmes), supervising independent work of students (counselling based on an individual approach) and maintaining links between research activities and practice. The international relevance of the article lies in the possibility of improving research training in developing countries due to US and European experience. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to overcome traditional (over-theoretical) approaches to research training of social workers.

Keywords: *comparative studies, motivation, spontaneous choice, readiness, links with practice.*

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Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) abroad have been striving to optimally combine scientific and academic training by involving students in research and experimental work.

The focus on research activities is the essential condition of professional self-determination and culture (Povidaichyk et al., 2017).

In some leading countries (the USA, France, Hungary, Germany), state and national education standards indicate an obligatory involvement of students in research. At the same time, some departments of HEIs seek to know whether applicants are ready for research activities or have already engaged in research at school (Lisenko, 2002).

Some scholars claim that research communities abroad enhance the quality of social work education due to a well-developed system of research activities in HEIs (Bombik, 1996; Doel & Shardlow, 1995). It is important to note that social work departments of universities implement this requirement clearly and consistently.

Ukrainian scholars, who follow forms and methods of teaching and research activities in Western countries, point out both similar and different trends. This is of special interest in terms of choosing which aspects of their experience appear to be more relevant and suitable for Ukraine's higher education (Demchenko et al., 2021; Sheremet et al., 2019).

Given the wide range of approaches to research training of social workers in leading countries, Ukrainian practitioners and researchers tend to show greater interest in typological features of education systems. In the context of Ukrainian methodological discourse, their study is quite relevant as Ukraine lacks authentic traditions of social work training and is open to testing the best social traditions. Indeed, the new state with its critical view of well-established sociological traditions can be a sort of a litmus test. Being without the corresponding experience, Ukraine is also "a blank canvass" for implementing neoliberal concepts of social work training.

On the other hand, Ukrainian scholars, who were raised in the spirit of authoritarian traditions of social security, can critically evaluate the centuries-old experience of Western countries. It would allow one to complement general revision, deconstruction and critical discourse on a postmodern vision of research training for social workers.

The article aims to identify common and distinct characteristics in two key aspects of research activities within social work training in the USA and Europe: external (organization and content) and internal (student's personality). To this end, the article relies on both primary sources (the

works of Western sociologists and methodologists) and their justification in the works of Ukrainian scholars. This approach allows one to formulate a hypothesis: comparative-typological description “externally” (from the perspective of scholars from the young post-colonial state) will show a) the most acceptable models of research training for social workers; b) invariant trends in developing countries.

Importantly, the article uses theoretical comparative-typological methods concerning different aspects of organizing research activities: from supervision to motivation of students. The abstraction method allows one to evaluate the research subject without bias. Receptive projection makes it possible to choose forms and methods of improving social work education in Ukraine.

A Comparative Study of Research Activities within Social Work Training in the International Discourse

A detailed analysis of scientific articles (indexed mostly in Scopus) proves that the majority of them imply a typological or comparative study of social work in narrow epistemological or regional aspects. Most works deal with spheres of society related to social work, their mutual influence and penetration, irrational interaction between sociology and culture, religion and traditions. In particular, Canda (1989) focuses on religious and spiritual aspects of human behaviour in social work degrees programmes. The researcher describes the practical influence of beliefs and customs on the personal aspects of participants in social interaction (Canda, 1989).

As early as the 2000s, attempts to eliminate religious, ethical, aesthetic and other irrational aspects of sociological practice and science faced the problem of how to deal with the cultural diversity of members of society. In Europe and the USA, sociologists tried to reconcile and consider the needs of different cultures, which made sociological studies rather relevant. Furman et al. (2005) conducted a survey of UK and US social workers from the British Association of Social Workers and the National Association of Social Workers, respectively. The findings are as follows: “a majority of the respondents in the UK (76%) and the US (73%) indicated that their training programs lacked content on religion and spirituality; in the UK, 57% of the respondents believed that social workers should increase their knowledge on spirituality, compared with 90% of the US respondents” (Furman et al., 2005). This situation may be associated with rather higher levels of secularism in UK society. One must admit, however, that there is

still no solid research on these or other aspects of social work conducted by students.

A lack of social work research in universities can be partly explained by the interprofessional and often quasi-professional nature of both research and social work itself. Both the USA and Europe are currently promoting the development of interprofessional social assistance. This trend has led to several sociological studies on one's readiness for interprofessional assistance in various fields: volunteering, psychology, health care. Gachoud et al. (2012) claim that social workers, nurses and physicians agree on "a core meaning of patient-centred practice as identifying, understanding and answering patients' needs". At the same time, one can observe "a hierarchy of patient-centeredness across the professions in which both social work and nursing regarded themselves as more patient-centred than others" (Gachoud et al., 2012). Still, similar works do not consider the views of social work students.

Quite noteworthy is a cross-national comparative study by Weiss (2005), who identifies common and distinct features in professional ideology among social work graduates in 10 countries. As noted by Weiss (2005, p. 101), "students in all the countries attributed poverty to structural causes and supported the extension of state social welfare as a way of dealing with poverty". It must be noted that differences reflect the variability and interaction between "centrifugal and centripetal forces" of social work globally.

There are also sporadic comparative studies on the implementation and role of social work in the USA and the UK. They indicate a longer history of advance care planning in the USA. At the same time, differences between the countries relate mainly to management. According to Stein and Fineberg (2013), "social workers can assume vital roles, including patient and family education; promoting meaningful communication among patients, family members and health care providers; assisting people facing illness in documenting their preferences; and advocating for patients' wishes". Unfortunately, there is no proof whatsoever that social workers are engaged in scientific discourse, which only stresses the relevance of this article. Even though fundamental comparisons of ways of organizing research in the USA and Europe have now lost their epistemological value, they are needed to reform education systems in developing countries.

Organization and Content of Research Training in the USA and Europe

This section attempts to compare general aspects of research training in the USA and Europe.

In the USA, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is responsible for the accreditation of curricula at the higher education level. It operates under the auspices of the National Association of Social Workers of the United States (NASW). It sets standards and training programmes and publishes “Regulations on Curriculum Policy” regularly (once every five years). This experience has proved its effectiveness in the practice of the US higher education system. Also, it is the basis for creating the national system of degree programmes accreditation, in particular, the establishment of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance.

It is also essential to justify the characteristics of research training of future social workers in the USA. According to Kozubovska & Stoika (2015), US higher education consists of four levels.

Associate degree. Such degree programmes last two years and involve studying individual sections of general scientific disciplines and humanities. They can also imply one-and-a-half-year professional training for specialists with special secondary education. As a rule, curricula of this level either do not contain a specific research component at all or consider it to the extent necessary for social workers providing services (patronage) to clients.

Undergraduate school. It covers degree programmes providing students with scientific knowledge about people and society, history and culture. Besides, they allow them to receive basic training in one area of social sciences, as well as acquire basic professional knowledge in a particular area of social work. Graduates obtain a bachelor’s degree in social work.

Undergraduate school already provides research training. Indeed, curricula may include such a course as *Statistics and Fundamentals of Empirical Research*. Yet, the emphasis is placed on quantitative and qualitative research methods, methods of mathematical statistics and qualitative and quantitative data processing. It is important to note that students learn how to write reports. Finally, curricula highlight the role of the latest computer technologies in practice and research activities.

Graduate school involves taught and research degree programmes, aimed at complementing and deepening the previously obtained undergraduate training per future professional activities. At the master’s level, these programmes prepare graduates either for teaching or research.

Postgraduate education includes professional training and doctoral programmes (PhD) (Ratner, 1997).

One of the defining features of undergraduate and postgraduate school lies in developing motives and skills for research, cognitive activities and mastering theoretical and methodological research principles. The US higher education system adheres to education fundamentalization that aims to strengthen the role of science in the educational process and ensure the prestige of the profession. Some foreign studies on social work indicate that it is essential to provide social workers with strong theoretical and methodological knowledge. Without it, they become “reproducers” of traditional experience and cannot promote the profession (Kraybill et al., 1982).

However, over the past decade, the Department of Social Work of Indian State University (USA) has been incorporating several theoretical and methodological thematic blocks (sociology, social psychology, the social work theory) in the curriculum. Besides, the CSWE has increased the requirements not only for the practical experience of faculty members and practice supervisors but also for their research competency. There is a tendency to involve leading scientists from different countries in teaching activities. They are supposed to conduct lectures, hold specialized training sessions (on specific social issues), participate in joint research projects, conferences and seminars.

Doel & Shardlow (1995) note that university training involves several areas of research in practical social work lying ahead. They are as follows: using current research when developing social practice strategies, as well as during direct interaction with individual consumers of social services (case studies); developing social work as a field of scientific knowledge by researching acute issues of the theory and practice of social work.

Thus, research training in the USA largely depends on the needs of institutions (universities and social agencies), so students can find what best suits their scientific interests.

A detailed analysis of relevant scientific literature, degree programmes and curricula of social work university departments in the UK, Germany, France and Sweden shows that, even though research training is a compulsory component of social work degrees, there is still no single approach to its organization in Europe. This is due to the lack of uniform standards on social work training. Even within one country, there may be several types of degree programmes, which differ in departmental subordination, funding system (private, public, religious), duration and quality of training.

In the UK, functions of universities and accreditation bodies are somewhat different. In particular, universities are responsible for assessing students' academic knowledge, whereas the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) sets curriculum requirements.

In Austria, Belgium, Spain, France and Sweden, common standards of education are determined by law at the state level. In Sweden, the Ministry of Education sets the "framework" standards for education in the field of social work following regional and other features. At the same time, educational institutions may solve academic problems autonomously. Indeed, they can determine the content and structure of degree programmes and curricula or, for instance, the list of exams. As a result, the content of research training in this country reflected in degree programmes and curricula may differ within different institutions.

In some countries, including Sweden, there is a "link" between the education system and specific conditions of universities' activities. Local authorities act as customers for social work schools since they determine the required number, define specializations of social workers and their level of research training, as well as correlate commissioning of social services with activities of social institutions and offices (Lohvynenko, 2014).

Different countries use different solutions to this particular problem. In Spain, they almost neglect academic training, while German HEIs prioritize theoretical training. It is important to note that social work combines aspirations for academic status and requirements of daily practice. At the same time, one can observe a somewhat difficult coexistence between eclectic socio-scientific disciplines, on the one hand, and a specific form of teaching research, on the other hand.

In Europe, social work students are involved in a wide range of research activities, whose complexity also varies. Some universities implement only some of its elements. Others maintain a whole system of research activities, which requires students to conduct research throughout the entire period of higher education study. However, the early involvement of students in research work is a common feature of research training in HEIs all over Europe (Ben-David, 1992).

Today, most US universities aim to improve research training. Indeed, HEIs need to solve scientific and educational tasks, involving students in scientific research. Consequently, students develop those qualities associated with intellectual discipline and realize the importance of lifelong learning. Research and education are equally mandatory for university students and ensure the development of their intellectual culture (Zakirov & Liakhovich, 1994).

In both Europe and the USA, it is students who monitor the content of degree programmes and students' progress in the context of the main three approaches (or their variants). They are as follows: a) state structures (ministries, special committees) are responsible for the approval and monitoring of education standards and curricula, while HEIs are entitled to maintain autonomy (the UK, Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Sweden); b) public organizations of professional social workers monitor the content of education (the USA); c) HEIs are entitled to monitor the education content (Germany).

Reinforcing Research Activities of Students: a Comparative Aspect

Given that research activities act as an unexpected and stressful factor for students who lack stylistic, analytical and prognostic skills, it is essential to motivate them for such work. Thus, one should analyze the needs and readiness for research activities in all participants.

A survey of university teachers from Indian State University (USA), placement supervisors, practical social workers, students of the Department of Social Work (42 respondents) shows that all the respondents consider social work research as a mandatory component: 1) all of them indicate the need to include practical research tasks in all academic courses; 2) 87% of respondents suggest that the faculty members of the Department of Social Work should participate in research activities, too; 3) 79% of the teaching staff point out to mandatory participation of practical social workers in joint research projects with the departments of social work; 4) 75% of respondents consider it necessary to boost students' motivation towards research activities (Diachek, 2002).

According to the CSWE requirements, research knowledge which university graduates should acquire includes general methodological and scientific laws, patterns, principles, as well as provisions based on them; the most general laws and patterns of scientific and cognitive activities and appropriate research methods; c) ways and methods of research used in various fields of social practice.

In US universities, research activities take several forms. Indeed, research units can be included in general and specialized courses or the framework of such courses as *Social Statistics*, *Research on Social Work*. Besides, they can be incorporated into research projects or act as a mandatory part of objectives of practical training. These objectives can be the following: 1) to identify and describe typical cases of using research methods when working with social agency customers; 2) to analyze ethically acceptable limits of research activities in a particular agency; 3) to identify promising areas in the

development of social work with some group of customers based on appropriate research methods (Diachek, 2002). This approach allows one to incorporate research activities in academic courses rationally, as well as adjust them to life conditions.

The full training programme for social workers includes theoretical courses and practical training in social agencies. These two forms of learning implemented under various conditions differ from each other. Practical knowledge can supplement theoretical knowledge and skills and vice versa. This process leads to the integration of theory and practice and helps one create a professional researcher.

The analysis of documents regulating activities of social work departments in US universities shows that the CSWE proposes to include such basic courses as *Human Behaviour and Social Environment*, *Social Security Policy and Services*, *Social Work Practice*, *Research on Social Work*, *Field Practice* in social work degrees. In the context of these courses, research activities motivate students by the fact that social science is a practical rather than eclectic area that will help them acquire skills to become professionals and achieve financial stability.

In the USA, professional training of social workers is focused on the development of research literacy (Bombik, 1996). The ability to understand, critically evaluate and selectively use scientific knowledge encourages students to become smart users of research tools.

European universities encourage students to engage in research on random problems coming from real life. Therefore, case studies play a prominent role in training students for research. They imply a comprehensive study of some case (actor), such as a person, family, individual society, thus focusing on a specific social issue. Research actions combine practice and research, which can be carried out simultaneously. Also, social work university departments offer students to conduct minor research projects, working autonomously or in a group (under supervision).

It must be noted that European students are gradually involved in research activities: from acquainting with research methods and methodologies to conducting actual research in different forms. As part of the course on social work research, students participate in the following stages: choosing relevant research methodology and methods; formulating research points; working with scientific and professional literature; developing research projects; carrying out record-keeping, calculations, codification; performing sampling procedures and data analysis; interpreting research findings with the aim of their practical use; writing research reports. The programme of this course includes writing essays, reviews (based on

scientific literature and articles from professional journals), selecting research methods for specific projects, conducting individual or group research projects.

It is also important to consider the emotional side of research activities. In this regard, research project managers organize “open days” so that students can obtain relevant information on some individual research projects and boost their motivation toward research activities.

Since the 1960s, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has been introducing students to the world of today’s research. In particular, they require their students (Years 1-4) to organize various research in different institutions and organizations under individual contracts and, yet, under the supervision of their university teachers. At first, only 25% of undergraduate students participated in the programme, titled “Undergraduate Research Opportunities”. Eventually, however, their number increased to 75% (Ratner, 1997). The US pedagogical community believes it necessary to involve students in research as an integral part of the curriculum.

Thus, reforms in higher education abroad concern both the principles of organizing students’ independent research and various aspects of the educational process as a whole. The point rating system serves as an effective means of enhancing students’ learning activities in terms of module-based learning. It reflects students’ progress by indicators of an individual cumulative index, which is a variant of the credit units system adopted in many countries.

Besides, the organization of student research largely benefits from the new concept. The latter covers systematic encouragement of innovative initiatives; enhancement of the interdisciplinarity principle (as opposed to narrow specialization); links between the basic and specialized academic courses; proper coordination of research programmes by relevant bodies (Usmanov, 2009).

Given that academic colleges aim to develop students’ creative skills, higher education systems abroad are facing significant changes. Now, the focus is on more active types of independent work. At the same time, university teachers should boost students’ motivation towards independent work. Extracurricular activities are the main form of the educational process, during which students acquires the necessary knowledge, develop appropriate skills and abilities and, thus, prepare for creative activities. In the US higher education system, the ratio between time spent in the classroom and on independent work has changed dramatically. Indeed, it was 1: 2 in the 1960s and is 1: 3 now (Barnes & Ephross, 1994).

Concerning motivational techniques, the US and European universities apply multimedia, facilitate genre-based diversity of research activities and maintain links with actual social events. Bombik (1996) indicates that students learn by example. To this end, university teachers should demonstrate professional commitment to research through their behaviour. The familiarization with different methods, as well as the demonstration of close links between research and practice, will help students to better understand the importance of including scientific methods in social work (Bombik, 1996).

The main teaching aids which social work university departments use to engage students in research activities include audio recordings, slides, movies, computers, the Internet, diaries, letters, reports, protocols (Allan-Meares, 1994). Besides, they employ various types of scientific sources (books, textbooks, scientific reports, professional periodicals) included in the list of recommended and additional references for each course. The course on human behaviour and social environment requires every student to conduct a comparative analysis of any concept in the context of one of the social issues (poverty, violence, racism). Also, they need to prepare 2 or 3 essays on selected topics, as well as oral presentations on the results of critical analysis of scientific sources. Students are encouraged to compare the opinions of scientists and social workers. Similar requirements apply to all other courses included in social work degrees. As a result, students learn to work with different types of sources, think critically, analyze, compare, formulate their views on common or little-studied theories of social work and justify them.

Conclusions

Thus, research training of future social workers abroad involves profound theoretical training. Besides, it implies teaching students to acquire new professional knowledge autonomously and familiarizing them with the basics of social work research.

In general, the system of research training consists of the following stages: junior years and senior years.

At the first stage of training, two-thirds of the study time are allocated to independent work, which is strictly planned and supervised by university teachers. Besides, students learn how to develop research skills. The essential part of research training is the second stage. In the USA, Germany, France, and Sweden, research activities act as the basis of

professional training for those students who plan to conduct research after graduation.

A detailed analysis of research activities within social work training at US universities makes it possible to identify several characteristic trends which should improve such training in Ukraine. They are as follows: 1) the fundamentalization of research training, which implies the inclusion of fundamental theoretical courses and research-based tasks in degree programmes and the involvement of highly qualified research staff in teaching; 2) research orientation of academic courses, which aims to address the needs of practical training and is realized through placements and internships in social agencies, thus creating “research space” for students.

Although foreign universities have gained significant experience in this particular area, university teachers identify several difficulties in planning and implementing research training. The most common are as follows: defining goals of research courses and their topics; practising methods of teaching these courses; developing progress criteria for students working on research projects; ensuring the links between research courses, especially basic courses; reducing students’ resistance to studying research courses on social work.

It is essential to plan these courses so that research methods are perceived as an integral part of the practice to overcome the difficulties mentioned above. University teachers coordinating research courses should more actively use role-playing games based on practical training topics since they can develop the necessary research skills in students (Doel & Shardlow, 1995).

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