

inSocialWork Podcast Series
The University at Buffalo School of Social Work

Episode 198 - Dr. Jeane Anastas and Dr. Cynthia Franklin: The Science of Social Work

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[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocial Work Podcast Series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate. We connect. We care. We are in social work.

Prof. Peter Sobota: Hi, from Buffalo. Students and faculty at all levels are returning for the new academic year and here in Buffalo that means a tiny bit more traffic. Lots of talk about football. Cool crisp nights perfect for rest and we're all squeezing in last minute warm weather activities into our schedules. I'm Peter Sobota.

A scientist no less than Albert Einstein once said not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted. In this episode our guests Dr. Jeane Anastas and Dr. Cynthia Franklin bring forth a discussion about how our profession attempts to integrate practice and research. Framing the profession's commitment to evidence-based practice as an ethical and accountability issue, our guests both long-term practitioners and academics look back and forward at social works response to the science of social work practice. Citing the controversy related to qualitative versus quantitative research they argue that synthesizing knowledge across research traditions is the desired goal. Further our guest comment on the factors that complicate practitioners adoption of evidence-based practices; what the struggle is for those in the trenches of practice; and, finally they acknowledge the professional dynamics that limit social work research and who gets to initiate the questions that get studied.

[00:02:07] Jeane Anastas, Ph.D, LMSW, ACSW, is professor at the Silver School of Social Work New York University where she teaches in the MSW Ph.D. and DSW programs. Recently she was the President of NASW. She has published on the science of social work, epistemology and practice, the mental health needs of low income pregnant teens, doctoral education and teaching and social work, and a range of women's issues. Cynthia Franklin, Ph.D, LCSW, is a Sternbergh Spencer Family Professor in mental health and assistant dean for the Ph.D program at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Franklin also holds a faculty fellow appointment at the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk in the Department of Special Education. She is the current editor-in-chief for the Encyclopedia of Social Work, has over 150 publications and professional literature, and is the author of several books. Dr. Franklin's research examines the practice and effectiveness of solution focused brief therapy with children and adolescents. Over the past 25 years Dr. Franklin has worked as a therapist, consultant, trainer, and researcher for schools and mental health agencies. Our guests were interviewed in March of 2016 by our own Dr. Tom Nochajski, Ph.D research professor here at the School of Social Work. He also wouldn't mind if I mentioned he is a Marine Corps veteran.

We'd like to mention that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experienced while recording. Thanks and we hope you like the podcast.

Prof. Tom Nochajski: I am Tom Nochajski. I'm a research professor here at the University at Buffalo and I'm the person who will be trying to guide us through this.

[00:04:07] And I will let you folks do your introductions now. I guess Jeane if you want to go first.

Jeane Anastas: Hi I'm Jeane Anastas I'm a professor at New York University's School of Social Work and I became formally interested in these issues during the time that I was serving as president of the NASW.

Cynthia Franklin: I'm Cynthia Franklin and I'm the Sternbergh Spitzer Family Professor in mental health and also the assistant dean of doctoral education at the University of Texas at Austin. And these are issues I've really been interested in throughout my career as they were involved in social work over time. But I see some similar themes to work I've done all long as you mentioned. That would be you know to integrate practice and research together. OK. So I'll start with a question that kind of tries to get at the way you became involved with this. How did each of you become concerned with practitioners views on these issues and that evidence based practice and science of social issues. Well I can speak to that and I was recently trained as a clinical social worker. Even at the NASW level as a scientist practitioner model it was really emphasized to me at that time and I guess I really took it to heart that you know these issues are not just issues of science that they're issues really ethics and accountability for our profession so that practitioners of social work have a very important public duty to be able to provide the very best practices to our clients.

[00:05:45] And so in my training and my MSW training that was important to me and then in my own practice experience working with clients saw the need for social workers to learn the best practices that were available and helping clients and I worked a lot as a researcher. Once I came into academia really working with practitioners in the field who had developed innovative practices in clinics and one of the models I worked with with a solution focused brief therapy approach and my work with the people that developed that model convinced me even more that it was important for practitioners you know their views to move forward into the research. Yeah I agree with you about this being an important issue. I always try to reinforce this with my masters students as well that it's important for them to understand the impact are having on their clients and the only way to do that is to collect data to see what's going on with your client and be consistent about that process. So I try to do that as well so that's interesting and I also like your idea about the solution focused up but I'll save that for potentially another 16. Well I am not a direct practitioner myself rather I'm an academic. It happens that I my career has been teaching in schools that have been clinically focused.

[00:07:13] That is to say emphasizing direct practice in their education and first of all I value the right practice in social work because that is what most social workers are doing according to all of the surveys that you want to look at and I began my work for many years I taught research and was struggling with some of the same issues are trying to address some of the same issues you mentioned Tom about helping students to see that we had a professional obligation to be responsible in our practice and to care most about what happens to the people we serve. As a result of serving them then when I became President of NASW a few years ago it was because of that position that I was invited to one of the annual retreats that has been happening over the last five or six years where the topic of Social Work science is being addressed in some links in depth. When I presented there it was to point out that I was there representing practitioners and that they were not practitioner voices in that discussion and tried to suggest a number of ways for what I was calling effecting a rapprochement or a better rapprochement between the world of practice and the world of science and research. And I have remained involved in the discussions since then. Again interesting responses and I appreciate that. So let me then move to the next question and that she while

evidence based practice is today's Buzz. What has been the recent history of research on practice and social. I can speak to that. I'm really really amazed at how far our research has come over my career.

[00:09:08] You know I've been practising social work for now more than 25 years and I can tell you that our research has really grown during that time and I was really happy to see recently that Bruce Sire published a systematic review in the research on sex work practice where he actually found 740 studies that were conducted by social work researchers that are our cities that's random clinical trials you know really remarkable to me is how many of those existed in cross this the narrowing journals and how the social work researchers were really working in a professional teams or in a national settings. How far are our research had really reached out beyond sort of to work. And I work a lot you know with doctoral students now. And what I see you know even working with clinical studies students are studies students in general that when they're very young even before they want to comes Idato problem when they're just thinking about the doctoral program as a real interest in building the research on social work practice. And so I see that as a turning point for I feel. And this is something that Jane and I have had discussions about and that's why I really appreciate it her leadership when she was asked to be president because I think our field isn't making a turn toward interest in research and use evidence based practices and I've seen younger students both in MSW and doctoral programs and the practitioners in the field being much more interested in it and they are in past generations. And I would like to mention that it is truly an intellectual leader in our field of social work she says. It's like a of social work for example and really has a good overview of knowledge in the field entirely and has been entrusted with that work because she is such a sound thinker and scholar alone. Thank you Jeane I appreciate that.

[00:11:08] I have a kind of a follow up to that because again as I work with those doctoral students and Master's level students in one of the things that always comes out is that when you start talking RCT it focuses heavily on quantitative approaches and what I find is that a lot of the especially the Master's students like the qualitative approach. So how do you see that potentially being folded into research and practice and social work. Well we're starting to talk about evidence based practice. Well I actually see that evidence and I'll let James speak to this too because she has written widely on epistemologies in our field and the different uses of research and is really one of the scholars that thinks about that and has contributed even to doctoral education in this area. But from my viewpoint you know I believe the evidence based practice really is open to all kinds of knowledge. And I think that's one thing when you really follow evidence based practice you have to be willing to synthesize knowledge across research traditions and that would be both quantitative and qualitative methods. And I see that field moving that way. I do a lot of work and systematic reviews and met analysis and even in that field there is more and more emphasis on being able to integrate the different types of research into those reviews. That's kind of what I would say to my students as well. I swear word on that quantitative versus qualitative issue. One of the things that the discussions of a science of social work have been very clear about is that any science in social work would be a multi method science that is to say that it would involve both quantitative and qualitative modalities of inquiry and each as appropriate and when it comes to syntheses.

[00:13:02] There is now a literature in fact on how to synthesize findings from qualitative studies as opposed to the meta analytic methods that are used with quantitative studies especially RCD and I'm doing such a review right now on a body of work on teenage pregnancy for example. And it's it's very illuminating and very helpful to say that this is what a number of qualitative studies have found that's interesting. I would like to hear more about that at some other time because again that's what we try to tell our students is that you need to use and choose the approach that is best for your research question and if it's a qualitative research question and that's what you should use. So it's just

interesting trying to fold that stuff in and again you know the mixed message approach and how to use qualitative within the context of a quantitative approach potentially or vice versa is really an interesting discussion but we should also mention I think that mixed method research is very much in vogue at this point in time just in fact and I should lay looks for some mixed method research. As you write the and. I agree yes I think the mixed methods and the use of qualitative research has really not. I agree with Jane that way it's not a question in our field anymore. I'm glad to hear she's doing this voluntary to you know synthesis. And I think more and more people are doing that in our field and you know even though my own experience you know I'm looking at methods now where you can not only synthesize our cities are quasi experimental designs but qualitative and quantitative research so that you can get a better view of the knowledge in a particular area.

[00:14:42] Yeah it's certainly a good approach to get at the mechanisms of change which will help us develop better interventions. I agree that that's interesting stuff. Yes exactly. It's interesting that you mention the ISM's of change Taung because in the research study I was involved in recently that's exactly how we were using it you know that we were using embed a summary approach to look at annotated and qualitative studies that dealt with the process outcome research and solution focus group therapy and what do you think are the major concerns of practitioners when it comes to evidence based practice. Well I can give my ideas about that and you know I know Jeane works a lot with students phishers and you know probably can chime in too. But I think that one of the things that your MSW students these days is they meet they have it had these to learn the evidence based interventions and in this study krump and I know that that's a concern also. Other people even in the Institute of Medicine for example is interested in tasters learn practices and how to deliver to science. But I also know that they like evidence based practices also they have to offer. And so when we talk those practice is very happy about it some other other criticisms though is that some of the approaches when they actually get out in the field talking to practitioners are too per you know are not flexible enough there to help researchers you know with research protocols and treat them animals and so forth are not flexible enough with the practice communities.

[00:16:22] And one of the things that is a concern of course that searchers are trying to address that is they haven't been tested on ethnic racial groups or as the groups or they might be forced upon populations when they're are surely not in them that it's for them with those changes. And that certainly has a larger advocacy concerns to social work practitioners and certainly there are some things I hear frequently along with the fact that there can be very expensive to me and Hijri and it's difficult sex work practitioners to sometimes the practices as resolved Yeah I hear that from a lot of folks we work with agencies and stuff like that where we have trainings in there and manuals and some of the issues they raise as well. It's not flexible enough for our clients to do different things with them and so on and sometimes you can see their points. But on the other hand sometimes they're just too thick to. They're not sold enough to give us their chance. They just jump to the conclusion that you know. Yeah I think that some of that you know to and you know that's the word to that's clinical training students involvement in that through the years that I think some students don't realize or maybe that training hasn't been that enough evidence dispatches us to realize how to make these practices more comfortable to them. Yeah they don't realize that really that practices any kind of intervention has to have good relations management skills. Right example Web sites and so some of the core things they learn in social or school has to be part of these interventions that are in there they might be following protocol.

[00:18:13] Also I don't know if some of the students may feel somewhat intimidated by the practices and maybe don't have enough connecting points or connect the dots between what they're learning and they're often very humanistically based social work classes and then some of these more behavioral and or concrete kind of evidence based practices. If I could speak to just briefly not

to students but to what I use from practitioners is often the evidence suppose that treatments are not chosen by the practitioners or that practitioners don't have input into what the best Estes might be best for their particular population but a particular model is imposed by a funder either public or private. That's what this agency shall be doing and that is I think nobody likes a kind of top down communication without even exploring what the point of view of the people who are going to be implementing the practices because they may well be quite expert about the population they're dealing with. So that's a real good point. I agree the Top-Down method just does not seem to work when it comes to implementing practices and the best translational science points that out. Yes really the practitioners should be involved from the bottom up with even the designing of the interventions and that's much better. OK having talked a bit about practitioner views what do you mean by the science of social. John Berkey an eminent scholar from the University of Southern California really began a conversation in research circles within social work several years ago and he was based on this topic of science and social work.

[00:20:00] Basically his main arguments for putting more emphasis on science within social work he was saying we should identify as a science just psychology nursing and other professional fields do. That we should be more formally defining social work science so that we can coalesce a professional identity around that. And he has made a number of attempts to talk about aspects what should and should not be in his view part of a social work science. He has as I said before said it was to be multi method, but bottom line I think those who advocate this are most concerned with enhancing the prestige of the social work profession in an era in which science is valorized in the culture as a whole. I agree with what Jeane is saying and I think it's a continuation of an old narrative in social work. Also we're trying to prove our worth against other professions. It goes back to the [Flexnor] or myth in our field. I think that's important to continue to enhance our field but at the same time I think what's neglected in that conversation sometimes is already recognising how far the social work practitioners have come and yeah this is a discussion I always have with my doctoral students and it always turns interesting it is ongoing and again a lot of it does come down to increasing prestige for social workers that sit on teams and potentially increasing their impact on those teams. It comes down to that I agree with what you're saying and the fact that it should be a mixed methods. But again it should be specific to what social workers do so I think that's important. OK. Why is science a better concept in research? Well I have a number of answers to that.

[00:21:48] And again working on something Cynthia said earlier just yesterday I was sitting with a doctoral student who was conflating the terms empirical with quantitative research and research does get simplified in many minds to mean that quantitative research is all that we need. When I believe we need all kinds of methods of inquiry and social work so that we can learn best. So science I'm like how people think about research science is conducted in the empirical world but it is not only empirical and it's perhaps not even most importantly empirical it really includes emphasis on theory which has to do with how you interpret any findings you have from any kind of inquiry. And I think what may be most problematic for practitioners sometimes is that science gets involved the notion of uncertainty in that we hold our State of the knowledge to be the best we can do at this point in time and obviously look over history you know the same world has been explained in many different ways and I think often especially new practitioners want something that is definite that they don't have to worry about whether or not it's true. They can just accept it and go from there because they're still struggling to really find their own personal grounding in the world of practice so I think the uncertainty inherent in science that is to say holding on knowledge lightly can be one of the points of tension between science and practice. Differing differences. Yeah and that tends to be one of the things that people point to is actually to negate research is that uncertainty. I get that from a lot of clinicians that well Research says this one dance as this another day. So yeah it's something that as a researcher I struggle with trying to convince practitioners about the uncertainty. The point I

think that's a great idea.

[00:23:58] You want to say anything that are well I really got the thumbs up to what you are talking about about science and science and research and has a broader broader concept and I guess the thing that always comes in my mind is that and sometimes I communicate to some of the doctoral students as well is that really science is a creative enterprise and sometimes it's not that way when it's thought about you know just in the lens of quantitative research. And I think it does ask us to entertain more limited knowledge like you are talking about but that is also a part of practice you know be able to be open minded to your clients and following the client and beginning with the client is that's all an open minded kind of process as well. I agree. Good points. Good point. All right. In 2013 you wrote a column in the end asked of you news about the signs of social work. Why did you do that. Well in addition to wanting to be accountable to our membership because as I said I was at the meetings. Owing to my role at the time as President of NSW I was concerned that this whole conversation that was happening in the academic realm the people in the field as a whole didn't know what was taking place and didn't know anything about the nature of the conversation. So I felt responsibility to inform our members when I wrote that piece I did something innovative in that I invited any social worker who happened to read it to to send me an email and commenting on it one way or the other.

[00:25:42] And if we had a minute I really can't identify four themes that came through in NSW member's responses. The first of course was that science is helpful and social work would be more effective if we had a stronger scientific base and as another writer commented because we have an obligation to our patients families and communities to practice based on proven results. However there was quite a different theme which was sort of the second strain of comment that I saw in the responses which was that innovations in practice need study in other words it's typically a researcher approaching a practice agency or group of practitioners to answer questions generated by the researchers as one person wrote We are trying to generate practice based evidence which is also called PD on the work we already do which relates to the third thing which was I need help that social workers really knew that they needed the help of researchers as consultants in the design of research and doing the research and they also needed funding to do research on practice innovations. By the way a few important in Europe this issue of using social work science to look at practice innovation has gotten a fair amount of traction. Finally the last thing was the problems they saw with social work sites and of course some people said those would be predictable that social workers molded both by science and art. And another concern that was raised was researchers.

[00:27:23] I'm going to quote here researchers seek to pound a normal Seddik square peg into a graphic round hole meaning you know you can have a group result of significantly better outcomes in an RC tier or a experiment that's an average that doesn't tell you how each and every individual client is going to respond to a particular intervention. Not all are going to respond as well as others. So this is the problem for practitioners they are dealing with individual cases and having to make a decision about what's going to work in this very particular situation and findings from averages of groups don't tell you everything you need to know about them. Yeah that's actually an argument that's being made now even within the quantitative realm where they're moving from center to person center types of analyses. So it seems like you know it's starting to spread. And those are really great points. There are also issues I think where at least we try to do some research and we try to integrate the qualitative quantitative into a mixed message. A lot of times natural we look at is within the context of a small qualitative study. Okay it worked for these guys. Why did it work. Why didn't it work for these guys and go into more in-depth kinds of approaches or qualitative and now she's trying to study those specific factors to determine how we might change the interventions to better suit those that it didn't work. And I see I went on to question a minute. Well the two together

you know you were present when we did the workshop on the NSW conference ago and I wonder if you have anything to add on your impressions from the responses.

[00:29:08] Well one thing I wanted to add is I just wanted to thank Jean at the time that I think it was a very good conversation that she opened up and I'm glad that she is really thoughtful about the fact that researchers could be up here doing this and the practitioner should know about it. To open that up practice practitioners and we did do this workshop and I guess were things I was taken by the workshop was how well attended it was because it had the practitioners and to come to this workshop on the sounds of social work and there was a large group I think more than 30 people that paid to come to it. And so I think that shows like interest in it and you and I did try to collect some other information before it came in at the comments. And one of the things I read through those mercenaries again recently and I guess one of the things that really struck me was with one of the points that Gene was making and her themes is that they were asking a lot of help with their individual so they would name populations like the people that have trauma or other populations and they would describe the setting and they would say that they wanted help. You'll be able to have more evidence based practices in those settings. And I think that speaks to the individual zation that they're looking for and learning these practices and also for the researchers to be able to speak. Oh that more like that. OK. Some years ago in one of her book's title Sandra Harding famously asked whose science is knowledge. How might this question be answered with respect to evidence based practice. Well this is an important question.

[00:30:43] You know and I think one that that's been written about a lot in the field and that you know genus specifically spoken to this related to the science of social work I guess from my perspective it's an important question because knowledge is contextual and you know it doesn't exist without some kind of values framework around it. And we certainly as social workers need to look at this who produces the knowledge what kind of system ologies guide their knowledge and how might a powerful people use the knowledge in ways that might be helpful or not helpful or might even marginalize our clients. So I guess what I'm saying is that when we teach researchers or even practitioners about being consumers of knowledge are developers of knowledge they also need to be able to think about what knowledge is and how it's constructed. And that's certainly what I try to teach my students and doctoral various class that I teach for example. All right. And Jane I would ask the same question of you except with respect to the science of social again like Cynthia I would like to commend you for bringing Senator Hardings penetrating questions into the discussion because it is a very very important issue to consider stated most bluntly. Those of us in the academic research community make our careers basically on studying often disadvantaged and marginalized populations and the question is what do they directly gain from participation in the research usually not very much directly although hopefully it guides knowledge that will benefit them and their communities in the future. On the other hand we are the ones who reap all the benefits from doing the work. And this has been criticized by people in Indigenous Studies by feminists by people and critical race studies and so forth. So it's something I think we really do need to consider.

[00:32:40] I once had a Dean to say to me that any time she brought up evidence based practice in her faculty meetings there would also be an outcry that that was essentially marginalized in communities of color because typically these interventions are no armed. Just like most experiments are conducted in very specialized groups often white groups European Americans and so forth. And we don't always know how well they translate to a different culture and people who define themselves differently. I would say also that it underscores the point that I've been trying to make that the practitioners who are not academics are really not at the table here and that puts them in a one down position. At that point given the discussion we've had what new directions do you see more fully including practitioners in. The evidence based practice and the science of social I mean I

think there's a lot of areas but I see three core areas that are going on social work in research sciences in general and one of those is as one engine earlier the Translational Sciences I think as researchers are really being asked to grapple with these questions more how do we get this knowledge to be relevant and not just benefiting the researchers know how we get them practice communities and even more importantly the clients sir at the Translational Sciences creating new models of science and practice communities are more involved in the design of interventions and then the research enterprise and I think that's a very important and I guess policy area of development and then one other area C is just really the emphasis that we have.

[00:34:32] Integrated Healthcare with a national teamwork that's going on now that allows social workers to contribute more broadly in health and medical settings or settings. Are there more other disciplines. I think we've always been a trans disciplinary field but I think that's being as a lot more with interactional teams and then the third thing is the friend challenges which are quite grand. I think they do bring attention to the fact that our research can solve significant social problems and I think that appeals to practitioners and I hope that will also be an avenue for where you practice research not come together just to make a brief comment on what you just said Cynthia. One of the things that in the science of social work discussion we have been trying to focus on is the fact that despite their different ways of going about it researchers scientists on the one hand and practitioners on the other hand all share the same social justice aims and the same desire to be of assistance to people especially those who are marginalised and oppressed and so forth. And that's something we have in common and we need to make more noise about that important criminality. This is a totally pie in the sky suggestion but I wonder what social work research and science would look like if it were practitioners identifying the scientific agenda for social work scholars going forward. Right now of course it tends to be funders who are emphasising what kinds of things they'd like studied and there are recipes and so forth but I would imagine that there would be some very creative ideas for research and scholarship coming out of the practice community and some way or another I'd like to hear from them about that.

[00:36:18] My second observation is that and I've said this in my arguments about a better rapprochement. I think researchers ought to use theories that practitioners are familiar with and that they use in their own practice and I've mentioned such things as attachment theory trauma theory. These are all things that practitioners call on commonly what they do and they have an empirical base but a lot of times researchers come in with conceptual frameworks again are not coming out of the everyday experience of practitioners but are coming forth for other reasons. And finally I think this is really a challenge all of our national social work organizations. We have bunches of different conferences a year in the profession there's even a move to try to unify them at this point. But we have no confidence at all that tries to bring scientists and researchers together with practitioners or even leaders in practice on an even footing to really trade ideas about what is needed for social work research agenda. And I'm sorry that no one has stepped up to the plate to do that. Maybe it needs a smart start. On a smaller scale whatever. But I think right now there is no organized forum in the field for social workers working in those two worlds which overlap to some extent but are different than others to really talk and most importantly listen. Yeah I mean that's a really good point. I know that I would love to see that happen. The problem will be is convincing on both sides actually convincing the two groups to come together.

[00:38:05] But then again from a science standpoint and from a researcher standpoint we tend to not talk in practitioner terms and sometimes that's an issue. So I think we need to learn that from the research side. And I think if we can get better that we might have more practitioners involved. The reasoning is a good point in a way. Ever listen to the practitioners and value what they have to say you know and there are times when students don't want to listen to you and typic evidence for

example Sodexo thing on both sides. I agree. Well you guys have any other parting thoughts that you would like to leave. Well Tom thank you for doing this. I'd just like to also thank you for putting this forward. You know this kind of conversation and I hope both practitioners and researchers will listen to it and then we'll come to some other discussions. Just like Jeane's NASW article did and I too want to thank you Tom. You and the team helped put together organize this very well. And as a result of everybody's work ahead of time I think it's been a wonderful conversation for me to be a part of. You have been listening to Dr. Jeane Anastas and Dr. Cynthia Franklin discuss the science of social work on social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school art history or online an underground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work Resource Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.