

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

2008-2009 Ph.D. WRITTEN PRELIMINARY EXAMINATIONS
Sample Questions

Practice

Dennis Saleebey (1992) has said that “the obsession with problems, pathologies and defects, while productive of an impressive lode of technical and theoretical writing, may be less productive when it comes to actually helping clients grow, develop...” In contrast he states that “social work practice is guided by a profound awareness of and respect for clients’ positive attributes and abilities, talents and resources, desires and aspirations.

- a) Describe the philosophy, key components and practice principles of the strengths perspective.
- b) Critique the strengths and weaknesses of the strengths perspective for social work practice. Discuss the following:
 - The conceptual and empirical base of the perspective
 - The role of pathology and strengths in practice
 - How this perspective applies to diverse populations and problems
- c) Describe how the strengths perspective can be implemented in assessment and intervention methods. Illustrate your understanding by use of a case example.
 - What assessment methods are available in this approach? Describe how you would assess the situation.
 - What interventions would you use?
 - Describe the process of work with the client from this perspective.
 - How you would evaluate progress?

Research

The research enterprise is about asking meaningful questions and using the most appropriate methods to answer them. For most social work research questions, the process of developing answers requires gathering data that are some sort of representation of the phenomenon we really care about, by means of some instrument(s), from a sample that is typically smaller than the entire population of interest, and then using some sort of respected method for determining what the data mean. Integral to this research process are the concepts of reliability and validity.

- a) Explain what each of these concepts (reliability; validity) means, and why each is important in the research process. Discuss the ways in which validity and reliability are viewed and understood in quantitative and qualitative research.
- b) Discuss at least 3 strategies used in quantitative research to enhance reliability, and at least 3 used to enhance validity.
- c) Discuss at least 3 strategies used in qualitative research to enhance reliability, and at least 3 used to enhance validity.
- d) Discuss the relationship between reliability and validity.
- e) Based on the above discussion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative research in terms of reliability and validity? Of qualitative research? What do they suggest about the types of questions for which each approach is most appropriate?

Policy

The welfare rolls are at their lowest levels in the United States since Johnson's War on Poverty. Does this mean that welfare reform is working? Please answer this question by addressing the following items:

- a) Briefly summarize the main points of the TANF legislation.
- b) Choose at least three major policy analysts from differing perspectives listed on the Ph.D. bibliography, and discuss how they would respond to the notion that "welfare reform is working"? What are the strengths and limitations of their arguments?
- c) How would you respond to the notion that "welfare reform is working"? In your answer, discuss the criteria you use to evaluate welfare reform and describe a reform that would meet your criteria for welfare reform.

History

Writing in 1970, activist social work scholars Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward noted that, ". . . all societies require productive contributions from most of their members, and that all societies develop mechanisms to ensure that those contributions will be made. In the market economy, the giving of relief (public assistance in all forms) is one such mechanism . . . It goes far toward defining and enforcing the terms on which different classes of men are made to do different kinds of work . . . Historical evidence suggests that relief (public assistance) is initiated or expanded during occasional outbreaks of civil disorder produced by mass unemployment, and then are abolished or contracted when political stability is restored . . . Expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms."

- a) Test this hypothesis against historical events and developments in the depressed years of the 1890s, the 1930s and the years of the 1960s that were marked by social disorder, as well as intervening years that were marked by better economic times (early 1900s, 1940s and 1950s) and the decline of social protest in the 1970s and 1980s.
- b) Based on your historical review, evaluate Piven and Cloward's hypothesis. Does the historical evidence support or their interpretation? What strengths do you see in their interpretation, and what are the weaknesses, if any, in their argument? Are there areas, or time periods, in which their interpretation falls short as an explanation for the ebb and flow of public assistance in American social welfare history?
- c) Briefly summarize competing explanations offered by other writers on social welfare history. What strengths and limitations do you see in their interpretations? Where do their arguments fall short in explaining the evolution of public assistance in American social welfare history?

Integrative

Social work claims to be a value-based profession. It also claims to be a knowledge-based profession. Your readings reflect different points of view on the role of values in social work research and in knowledge-building for policy and practice.

- a) Social work research is often distinguished from social science research because of the value orientation applied to knowledge building. Discuss your understanding of the role values play in social work research that distinguishes it from broader social science research.
- b) Choose at least 3 authors who have different points of view about the role that values do or should play in social work research and knowledge-building for policy and practice. Compare and contrast their points of view.
- c) Discuss your own point of view on the appropriate role of values in social work research. What are the implications of embracing a value base for defining an appropriate approach to knowledge building in social work? Explain your answer.
- d) The literature on social welfare history describes the gathering and use of social evidence to develop public policies as solutions to social problems. Using an example from this literature (e.g The National Federation of Settlements Study on Unemployment in 1927), describe and discuss the role of both values and empirical evidence in the example that you choose.