

Ambiguous Advocacy: A Systematic Review of Advocacy in Contemporary Social Work Literature

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Abstract: *Advocacy is often identified as a necessary component of social work practice. However, neither the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics nor the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) provides a uniform understanding of advocacy, leaving the understanding of advocacy ambiguous. Through a systematic review of forty-three articles published between 2000-2023, this study explores the conceptualization of advocacy within contemporary social work literature. While reviewing the articles, the authors utilized a case-to-cause paradigm to identify how advocacy has been applied throughout contemporary social work literature. While the findings indicate that contemporary literature confirms advocacy as fundamental to social work practice, it leaves the concept of advocacy vague. However, this study is limited to understanding advocacy in the social work literature base, not how advocacy is understood by social work students, educators, and practitioners. This article provides a conceptual definition of advocacy as well as strategies for advocacy's clarification.*

Keywords: Advocacy, systematic review, case to cause

From the foundation of American social work, especially concerning the settlement house movement, social workers have been engaged in advocacy. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, as the practice of social work has evolved, so has the profession's understanding of advocacy. Yet no uniform conceptualization of advocacy appears to exist, leaving the notion of advocacy rather ambiguous in how it is taught and applied in social work programs and practice. Therefore, through a systematic review, this article seeks to address a gap in the literature of how advocacy is understood in contemporary social work.

Both the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) emphasize the importance of advocacy in their foundational documents. In the NASW (2021) Code of Ethics, the term "advocacy," or its derivative, "advocate," appears seven times. Moreover, the preamble of the Code of Ethics declares advocacy as a key practice activity as social workers "strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2021, para. 3). Similarly, the CSWE (2022) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) includes the terms "advocate" or "advocacy" eight times. Despite the acknowledgment of advocacy's importance and its prominent placement in these documents, a common conceptualization seems absent.

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Advocacy in CSWE's EPAS is described as a component of both personal intervention and action taken to change policy. Yet this common conceptualization of advocacy seems indistinguishable from social work itself. Thus, these statements – while inspirational – contribute to the ambiguity of advocacy. When the micro-practitioner links the client to essential resources that resolve suffering, is that practitioner engaging in advocacy? Is the focus of advocacy exclusive to the macro level (e.g., enacting legislation, changing policy, affecting oppressive systems)? Does social work advocacy incorporate both micro and macro activities? Without a common conceptualization of advocacy and its variety of expressions within contemporary social work practice, the degree to which the profession has drifted from its foundational mandate (i.e., a commitment to advancing social justice, addressing human needs, and enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities) remains unknown. Additionally, fidelity to the expectations expressed in ethics and EPAS becomes challenging when the conceptualization remains muddled.

To help determine the existence of a common conceptualization, the authors reviewed the historical evidence of advocacy within the profession, as outlined in the literature review below. Through this review, the lack of clarity around the definition and activities of advocacy requires a stronger understanding of how advocacy is conceptualized. Therefore, the authors conducted a systematic review of recent American social work literature that addressed advocacy in some fashion. Thus, the aim of this study seeks to reveal a common meaning of advocacy based on contemporary social work literature.

Advocacy in Social Work: A Changing Notion

Since the foundation of Hull House, social workers have engaged in advocacy. “In some ways,” according to Hoefler (2019), advocacy “is the beginning point of the profession,” and the value of social justice that animates it, is one of the profession’s “most influential and enduring ideas” (p. 87). However, within a decade after the National Conference of Charities and Correction changed its name to the National Conference of Social Work in 1917, the unofficial commencement of professional American social work, the purpose, methods, and practitioner of advocacy were reappraised.

Initially, advocacy was not used to describe the activities undertaken to improve access to resources for those marginalized, to expand civil rights and protections, and to change oppressive systems. Instead, for the early social workers, this activity was community organizing, and it shared parity with casework (Reisch & Wenocur, 1986). Yet, by the end of the 1920s, community organizing became marginalized by social work organizations and schools. Casework was chosen as the primary social work practice as it was perceived to be more amenable to the dual demands of funding and professionalization (Reisch & Wenocur, 1986).

At the Forty-Second Annual Session of the National Conference of Charities and Correction in May 1915, Abraham Flexner, an eminent medical educator and the Conference’s keynote speaker, remarked that social work at the time did not meet all qualifications of a profession (Flexner, 1915). While the profession’s desire for professional status predates this declaration – as evidenced by the establishment of specialized training programs and schools – it fueled the professionalization effort, with

dire consequences to community organization practitioners. With social casework, the profession had a skill that could be taught, measured, and funded. However, community organizing – especially when in opposition to powerful and resource-rich entities – could threaten the profession’s professionalization trajectory (Reisch & Wenocur, 1986). By the 1930s, community organization and social action were transformed from efforts of social change to actions taken to facilitate enhanced utilization of welfare programs (Khinduka & Coughlin, 1975). In addition, the worker was encouraged to concentrate exclusively on the individual case to improve wellbeing, a professional endorsement of case advocacy that would endure until the 1960s (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016).

In response to the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War, the pendulum began to swing back, and the “notion that the social worker needs to become the champion of social victims who cannot defend themselves [an idea that] was voiced long ago by others... [had] recently been revived” (Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy, 1969, p. 16). This revival period also witnessed the adoption of a new name for social action: advocacy. According to Brager (1968), it was Charles Grosser, who in his 1965 article for *Social Work*, entitled “Community Development Programs Serving the Urban Poor,” first explicitly used the term advocacy to describe social work’s historic professional strategy. With this new understanding, the purpose of advocacy shifted from the support of the welfare system to “basic changes in major institutions” and to facilitating the “redistribution of power, resources, or decision-making” (Khinduka & Coughlin, 1975, p. 4). While cause advocacy was recognized as important, and the advocacy role was not limited to one’s clients, NASW urged social workers to “give first priority to the rights and needs of their clients” (Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy, 1969, p. 21). An unintended consequence of this action may have been the continuation of the profession’s preference for case over cause advocacy.

In the 2015 report of the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work, Mimi Abramovitz and Margaret Sherraden endorse the reintegration of case and cause into one social work practice (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2015). Utilizing the ecological framework, the financial capabilities model, the concept of oppression, and trauma theory, the worker addresses the immediate needs of the client as well as the environmental or structural issues that cause or maintain the problem (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016).

It is now more than a century since the National Conference of Social Work was established. During that period, the concept and experience of advocacy has shifted in its meaning, purpose, and goals. Additionally, with the recent release of the 2022 CSWE EPAS, now is a great time for the profession to reappraise its understanding of advocacy. Particularly, since macro-curricular guides are currently under development to operationalize the new EPAS. Therefore, this article asks the question: What is its contemporary understanding of advocacy?

Methods

A systematic review of empirical peer-reviewed articles that addressed advocacy and were published between 2000 to 2023 in social work journals was conducted. The authors

chose this timeframe because it was believed to adequately capture the contemporary social work period, and thus, relevant articles found in this frame should aid in the identification of the contemporary conceptualization of advocacy. Since the notion and expression of advocacy, and social work in general, may vary from country to country, only articles from the American social work perspective were included. The final criterion was the collection of articles in the English language only, given the authors limited proficiency in languages outside of English.

To identify articles based on the inclusion criterion, abstract search terms included: advocacy, advocates, advocating, social work, social workers, social work practice, social services, United States, America, USA, U.S., and United States of America. The inclusion criterion was selected regarding advocacy and its derivatives, as well as social work to have a more robust universe of studies. Additionally, as the concept of social work is understood differently based on country, the inclusion criterion was limited to the United States. Using these search terms, 1,037 articles were identified from databases, including Complementary Index, Academic Search Ultimate, Sociological Source Ultimate, APA Psycinfo, SocINDEX with full text, Medline, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Sociological Collection, and JSTOR Journals.

Before screening the articles for eligibility, 635 duplicate records were removed, and 160 records were excluded by library automation tools based on the inclusion criteria, resulting in 242 records to be assessed for eligibility. The authors manually reviewed the titles, abstracts, and full text of the 242 records and further excluded articles for not being published in a social work journal ($n = 29$), and for limited advocacy content ($n = 170$). Articles were identified as having limited advocacy content if the article did not reference advocacy within the article itself, but only included in the abstract, keywords, or title. Additionally, articles where advocacy was determined not to be central to the study were also indicated as having limited advocacy content. This process resulted in forty-three studies to be included in the review as shown in Figure 1. Additionally, a list of the articles can be found in Table 1.

Figure 1. *Flow Chart of Study Screening Process*

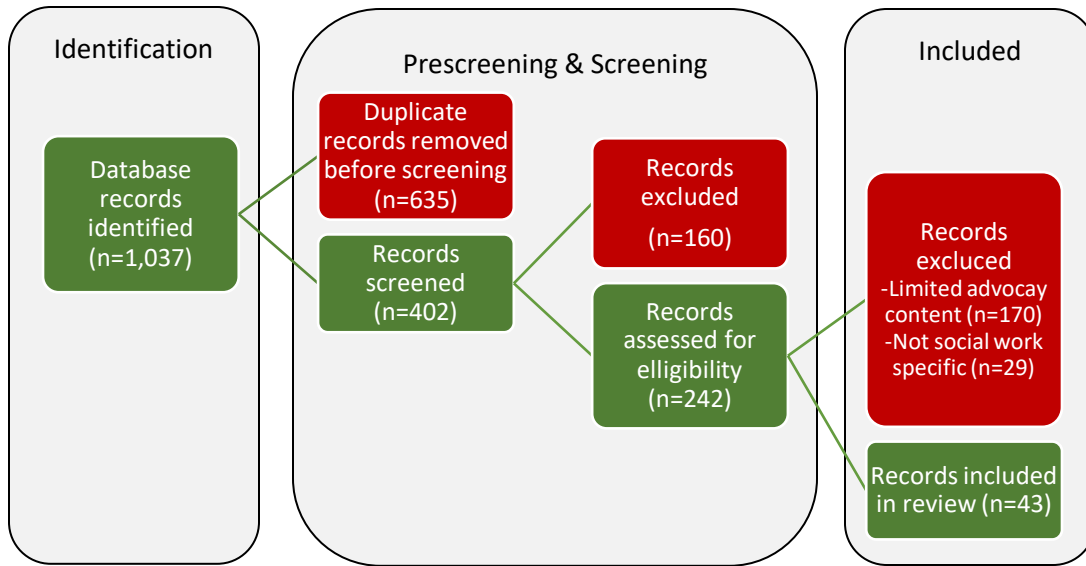


Table 1. *Articles Included in the Analysis*

| Author(s) | Year | Title |
|----------------------|------|--|
| Adamson et al. | 2020 | The SCOPE Intervention: Impact of a Social Care Optimization Pilot Initiative in the Emergency Department |
| Azzi-Lessing | 2010 | Growing Together: Expanding Roles for Social Work Practice in Early Childhood Settings |
| Beltran et al. | 2022 | Social Workers' Impact on Policy Through Regulations: A Case Study of the U.S. Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program |
| Bernadi et al. | 2012 | Abortion, Partial-Birth Abortion, and Adolescent Access to Abortion: An Overview for Social Workers |
| Bietsch | 2022 | Second Time Overlooked in Crisis: Examining How HIV/AIDS Health Policies in the USA Connect with Policy Implications Today for Aging LGBTQ Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic |
| Butler-Mokoro et al. | 2018 | Church-planting, Direct Service, and Advocacy: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Response to Welcoming the Sojourner |
| *Cox | 2021 | Addressing Anti-Semitism in Social Work Education |
| *Daniel | 2004 | Social Work with West Indian Families: A Multilevel Approach |
| Dulmus et al. | 2006 | Perspectives on the Mission of the Social Work Profession: A Random Survey of NASW Members |
| *Eliadis | 2006 | The Role of Social Work in the Childhood Obesity Epidemic |
| Ely & Dulmus | 2010 | Abortion Policy and Vulnerable Women in the United States: A Call for Social Work Policy Practice |
| Evans et al. | 2021 | A Human Rights Approach to Macro Social Work Field Education with Unaccompanied Immigrant Children |
| Gregg | 2009 | Psychosocial Issues Facing African and African American Women Diagnosed with Breast Cancer |

| Author(s) | Year | Title |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Hall | 2018 | Social Work Professional Organization Development: History, Purpose, and Possibilities |
| Hardina | 2014 | Deferred Action, Immigration, and Social Work: What Should Social Workers Know? |
| Hoefler | 2019 | The Dangers of Social Justice Advocacy |
| Hudson | 2017 | With Equality and Opportunity for All? Emerging Scholars Define Social Justice for Social Work |
| Jones et al. | 2022 | Social workers' attitudes toward reparations for African American descendants |
| Jones et al. | 2023 | Social Work Advocacy for Black Reparations |
| *Joseph | 2019 | Poverty, Welfare, and Self-Sufficiency: Implications for the Social Work Profession |
| *Knevel et al. | 2023 | Social Workers Putting into Practice the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| Kusmaul et al. | 2023 | Social Workers Critical to Honoring Commitments to Residents and Families in Long-Term Care |
| Lerner & Robles | 2016 | The Need for Social Work Advocacy to Create Social Justice for Transgender People: A Call to Action |
| Maschi & Killian | 2011 | The Evolution of Forensic Social Work in the United States: Implications for 21st Century Practice |
| McCabe et al. | 2016 | Civic Literacy and Social Work Education: Results From a Multi-Site Study |
| McCleary & Chaudhry | 2017 | Ethical Considerations for Social Workers Working With Muslim Refugees |
| Midgley | 2007 | Advocacy, Politics and the Responsibilities of Professional Associations |
| O'Brien | 2011 | Eugenics, Genetics, and the Minority Group Model of Disabilities: Implications for Social Work Advocacy |
| Pelts | 2014 | A Look Back at the Defense of Marriage Act: Why Same-Sex Marriage Is Still Relevant for Social Work |
| Perone | 2020 | Protecting Health Care for Transgender Older Adults Amidst a Backlash of U.S. Federal Policies |
| Reed | 2021 | Racial Disparities in Healthcare: How COVID-19 Ravaged One of the Wealthiest African American Counties in the United States |
| Ross et al. | 2022 | "We Are Not Taking a Backseat": Health Social Workers' Perspectives on COVID-19 Response and Recovery |
| *Sanders & Scanlon | 2021 | The Digital Divide Is a Human Rights Issue: Advancing Social Inclusion Through Social Work Advocacy |
| Scanlon et al. | 2008 | An Analysis of the Political Activities of NASW State Chapters |
| Siegel | 2022 | The COVID-19 Pandemic: Health Impact on Unaccompanied Migrant Children |
| Stoeffler & Joseph | 2020 | Poverty and Social Justice: The Building Stones of Social Work Identity |
| Suleiman AlMakhamreh & Hutchinson | 2018 | Unaccompanied and Separated Syrian Refugee Children: Case Study of a New Feature for Social Work Practice in Jordan |

| Author(s) | Year | Title |
|------------------------|------|---|
| Tan et al. | 2020 | Advocating for School Social Work to Advance Student Social, Emotional, and Mental Health: Strategies from Two Case Studies |
| Teasley | 2004 | School Social Workers and Urban Education Reform with African American Children and Youth: Realities, Advocacy, and Strategies for Change |
| Thompson | 2017 | Reflections on the Election of Donald Trump: Uninspired and Inspired Responses from a Social Work Faculty |
| Wilfong & Cirino | 2021 | How Social Workers Can Address Poverty in America |
| Witt & Medina-Martinez | 2022 | Transgender Rights & the Urgent Need for Social Work Advocacy |
| Yingling | 2021 | COVID-19: Social Work's Opportunity to Revitalize Advocacy for a Universal, Single-Payer Healthcare System |

*Note: * articles that included a definition of advocacy*

Findings

Findings of Systematic Review

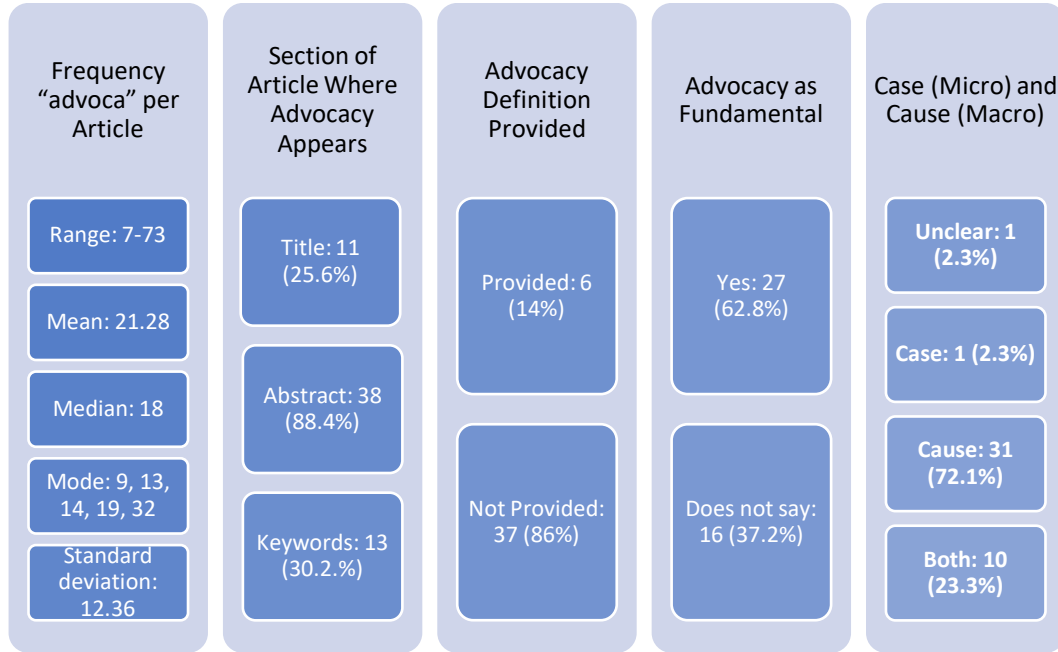
The articles were downloaded in PDF format to allow for the analysis of descriptive data to establish frequencies and trends, and the collection of qualitative data to determine themes. The authors used a tool, found in Figure 2, to analyze the frequency of variations of advocacy by using the search term “advoca.” This analysis determined (a) whether advocacy was featured in the title, abstract or keywords, (b) whether a definition for advocacy was provided, (c) whether advocacy was explicitly presented as fundamental to the social work profession, and (d) whether the focus of advocacy was case, cause, both, or unclear.

For the review of the literature, the authors conceptualized *case* as any reference to utilizing social work skills through actions of advocacy done for or on behalf of one's client (e.g., individual, family, small group) with the aim of effecting an end that directly impacts the client. While focused on the client, the results of case advocacy could benefit others. For example, a clinical practitioner might go beyond their job description to lobby a landlord on behalf of their client. Items were labeled as *cause* when they referred to advocacy or advocacy actions that were taken to effect macro-level change to entities (e.g., policies) for the realization of a social work value (e.g., social justice). The conceptual framework for the case to cause review is grounded in the work of Abramovitz and Sherradan (2016) noted in the literature review.

References to advocacy numbered from seven to seventy-three. Advocacy was in 25.6% (n=11) of article titles, 88.4% (n=38) of abstracts, and 30.2% (n=13) of keywords. Only 14% (n=6) of the forty-three articles included a definition for advocacy, while the majority (n=27) of articles had decisive statements regarding advocacy as fundamental to the social work profession. Case versus cause advocacy was also analyzed, with the sizeable majority (n=31) of articles solely describing advocacy from a cause perspective. Both case and cause advocacy were included in 23.3% (n=10) of articles, though notably

case advocacy was minimally included in those articles. Case advocacy as the sole focus occurred in 2.3% (n=1) of the articles, and one article did not clearly fit in the case to cause paradigm (2.3%).

Figure 2. *Analysis of Advocacy in the Contemporary Literature*



Findings From Formal Definitions

Given that so few articles included an explicit definition of advocacy, the authors thought it important to review the six definitions provided in contemporary social work literature. An outline of the definitions provided within the social work literature, along with a brief analysis of each, is found below. While most articles avoided a definition altogether, perhaps assuming a common understanding, several articles included a clear definition or the approximation of one. Yet no author provided their own, opting instead to refer to earlier formulations.

Some authors defined advocacy by listing advocacy-related actions. Cox (2021) drawing on Bliss (2015), defined "Traditional advocacy" as "reaching out to those in power through contacts, petitions, and protests" (p. 120). However, advocacy strategies today must focus on social networking and social media sites which are now major sources of information" (p. 120). Sanders and Scanlon (2021), building upon the work of Bliss, propose a six-step advocacy model for the digital age: "These include (1) identifying the cause and beneficiary of the advocacy campaign, (2) specifying an intended outcome, (3) identifying target audiences, (4) specifying strategies and tactics, and (5) constructing a plan for evaluating advocacy processes and outcomes" (p. 138). Also, Eliadis (2006) drawing on Woodside and McClam, describes advocacy as "educating clients about their

rights, teaching advocacy skills to clients, and applying pressure to make agencies and resources respond to client needs” (p. 87).

Daniel (2004), maintain that advocacy emanates from the social work value of social justice and that the action taken is to correct a power imbalance:

[T]he social worker plays an active role in changing those conditions that may impede the mutually beneficial interaction between people and the environment” ... [and, in some instances, advocacy must be conducted] “on two levels—on behalf of families to ensure that their interests are being served at the micro level, and policy advocacy in which the worker is an advocate for changes in policy that are conducive to their well-being and development. (p. 142)

Yet the quote included in Daniel (2004) failed to identify any constitutive actions of advocacy itself. However, Joseph (2019), who also refers to the work of Sosin and Caulum, includes their definition:

An attempt, having a greater than zero probability of success, by an individual or group to influence another individual or group to make a decision that would not have been otherwise and that concerns the welfare or interests of a third party who is in a less powerful situation than the decision maker. (p. 513)

Joseph (2019) explains that this definition

... implies both case advocacy and social advocacy. Advocacy done on behalf of one individual is known as case advocacy. Social advocacy, on the contrary, refers to political actions on behalf of large groups of people. Advocacy with and on behalf of marginalized populations has always been an aspiration for social workers. That is, when clients cannot defend themselves against injustice, social workers are expected to intervene by fighting along- side and on behalf of these clients. Hence, advocacy has become a social work cornerstone, something that contributes to the uniqueness of the profession. (p. 514)

Knevel et al. (2023), echoing Sosin and Caulum and Joseph, also anchor advocacy to the fundamental value which animates it. They maintain that advocacy functions to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct human rights by speaking out for and with those who are vulnerable, at-risk, or marginalized.

In reviewing the definitions provided above, a few themes become apparent. Primarily, the articles did not provide their own definitions of advocacy, instead citing older definitions of advocacy. In fact, two of the articles found their definition of advocacy grounded in the work of Sosin and Caulum (1983). Uniformly, the definitions identify the need for advocacy that arises from power-imbalance and include strategies to rectify these power-imbances with and on behalf of clients.

Additionally, the definitions attempt to understand advocacy within a multifaceted paradigm, not solely contextualizing advocacy as a cause-oriented skill, but instead recognizing the intersection of advocacy in case and cause practices. In particular, the definitions by Cox (2021), Eliadis (2006), and Sanders and Scanlon (2021) address not just the concept of advocacy, but also specific strategies and skills that are needed in the

advocacy process. However, the minimal inclusion of definitions, and the presumed assumption of an understanding of advocacy in the preponderance of articles, have several implications for social work practice, which is addressed in the subsequent section.

Implications For Social Work

The findings of the systematic review elucidate that the current social work literature in the United States, while identifying advocacy as fundamental to social work practice, leaves the definition of advocacy ambiguous. The findings of this systematic review have resounding implications for the status of advocacy in social work literature, and how identifying a uniform definition will impact social work education and practice. This study identified two key implications: advocacy is and should remain fundamental to social work practice but must also become unambiguous. Additionally, this review will conclude with a conceptual understanding of how contemporary social work literature defines advocacy and will hopefully develop a strategy to resolve the ambiguity surrounding advocacy.

Advocacy is Fundamental

The systematic review illuminates that advocacy is a fundamental component of social work practice. In fact, 62.8% (n=27) of the articles identified that advocacy is fundamental to social work. The articles deduce the fundamental nature of social work in multiple ways, including identifying advocacy as a key skill for social work practice and highlighting the perception of social work as a profession historically rooted in advocacy. As Joseph (2019) notes: “advocacy has become a social work cornerstone, something that contributes to the uniqueness of the profession” (p. 514). Thus, the review makes clear that advocacy is fundamental to the social work profession and aligns with social work’s values.

Indeed, social work is a profession with a unique value system, emphasized by a commitment to six core values: social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, service, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2021). While not explicitly incorporated as a social work value, it is conceivable how advocacy can contribute to social work values such as advancing social justice and espousing dignity and worth of the person. Additionally, a retrospective review of social work’s history is replete with examples of how social work, from the Settlement House Movement to the Civil Rights Movement, is rooted in advocacy. Thus, the fundamental nature in social work lore highlights the importance of understanding what is truly meant by advocacy. Therefore, advocacy must remain an integral component of the social work profession’s identity and those who dedicate their lives to it.

However, the notion of advocacy as a fundamental component of the social work profession does not resolve the ambiguity of what is meant by advocacy. Instead, it can be argued that advocacy has become little more than a buzzword, vaguely applied to social work values and obscurely retrofitted into the underpinnings of social work practice and the social work profession. It is essential that advocacy is not just reviewed as a fundamental component of social work, but that context is provided for practitioners to understand how the contemporary notion of advocacy has transpired and is applied.

Resolving the Ambiguity of Advocacy

While the systematic review determined that advocacy is fundamental to social work practice, the literature did not provide a strong conceptualization as to what is meant by advocacy. In fact, 86% of the articles (n=37) did not provide a definition for advocacy. Thus, the lack of a clear definition leads one to postulate what is meant by the fundamental necessity for advocacy and only fuels the ambiguity of advocacy in social work's lexicon. Even many of the articles that included definitions only addressed components of the skills and process of advocacy, without necessarily providing larger contextualization of advocacy.

Thus, for social workers to understand what is meant by the need for advocacy, there needs to be uniformity in the profession's identification of advocacy. The continued ambiguity surrounding advocacy, and the narrative structures that are built around discussions related to advocacy, only continues the bifurcation between micro and macro practitioners (Vodde & Gallant, 2002). It is imperative that the profession resolves the ambiguity of advocacy by adopting a uniform conceptualization of advocacy, with credence to the many ways that social work is practiced.

Contemporary Conceptualization of Advocacy as Cause Advocacy

The systematic review determined that advocacy, while fundamental to social work practice, has been conceptualized by the current literature in a vague manner. In fact, as noted, the preponderance of the literature made assumptions about the uniformity of the application of the term advocacy or neglected to address it at all. In reviewing the articles, the authors utilized the case to cause paradigm to determine if articles conceptualized and applied advocacy in a case or cause approach, based on the content and context of the utilization of advocacy within the article.

Overwhelmingly, the literature determined that advocacy is applied through a cause advocacy approach, with 72 % (n=31) strictly interpreting advocacy as a cause advocacy approach, and 23% (n=10) applying both a case and cause advocacy approach. In fact, only 2% (n=1) applied advocacy strictly as a form of case advocacy. Additionally, it should be noted that while advocacy is left ambiguous in the literature, the application of advocacy in the case to cause paradigm is more definitive, as only one article was unclear in its overall application of advocacy.

It appears consistent that contemporary social work literature conceptualizes advocacy in terms of cause advocacy. The following definition is derived from the contemporary notion of social work advocacy, including an amalgamation of the definitions reviewed within the articles:

Social work advocacy, a fundamental component of social work identity and social work activity, requires purposeful use of helping skills, primarily, but not exclusively related to activities that promote structural changes (e.g., reaching out to those in power, protesting, political activity, advancing policy) to eradicate

oppressive structures, correct power imbalances, and enhance environments with and on behalf of people.

The definition provided above develops an initial understanding grounded in 21st century social work literature. It highlights the fundamental and central component of advocacy to the social work profession. Additionally, it argues that advocacy is a deliberate action, rooted in social work skills, to address systems of oppression for all client systems. To address the questions posited in the introduction, the review determined that there is an emphasis on cause-advocacy as noted by 72.1% (n=31) of the articles contextualizing advocacy as cause advocacy. However, consistent with the formal definitions provided in the review, this definition does not relegate the practice of advocacy to macro spaces. Instead, advocacy is not a divide between micro and macro, but an innate component of applying social work skills in various practice settings to achieve the profession's primary mission of enhancing human well-being.

Conclusions

It must be noted that developing a uniform definition of advocacy was a central goal of the research study. However, the definition developed in this article can only conceivably reconcile how contemporary literature has conceptualized advocacy. A significant limitation of this study is that the scope of knowledge derived is limited to only contemporary American social work literature and does not provide a more encompassing understanding of advocacy. A more comprehensive understanding of advocacy would require further research into social work's historical perspectives of advocacy, how advocacy is presented in social work education, and how advocacy is interpreted and applied in social work practice. Thus, the definition laid out above is only an introductory understanding of the concept of advocacy. Readers should be cautioned from extrapolating this definition to how social work has historically understood the concept of advocacy and how advocacy appears in practice.

At the risk of leaving the understanding of advocacy as ambiguous as it is found in contemporary literature, the authors of this article also recognize the importance of deliberately understanding and conceptualizing advocacy. If advocacy, as noted in contemporary literature, is fundamental to social work practice, then developing an understanding of advocacy cannot occur hastily, lest endangering the initial endeavor of fortifying the profession's understanding and application of advocacy. The authors propose that additional research occur to determine a more comprehensive understanding of advocacy. This research must expand on the literature review, and consider how the profession, from its foundation, has conceptualized and applied advocacy. Also, a review of current social work students, educators, and practitioners must occur to determine how members of the profession currently conceive of advocacy.

This article is an introduction to the profession's understanding of advocacy. Through further review, the authors hope to develop a more thorough understanding of advocacy, its role in social work practice, and its application in social work practice. For something that is fundamental to the profession, it is important that due diligence is done to arrive at the most comprehensive conceptualization of advocacy and how this conceptualization can

be applied in social work education and social work practice. Leaving the concept of advocacy ambiguous risks rendering one of the bedrocks of social work practice hollow.

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