

'ECOMETRICS' –

DYNAMIC NEW DIRECTION IN ACCOUNTABLE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

In many different areas the profession of Social Work is still a dynamic field in the helping professions. Especially in this country where extensive poverty and lack of development is a practice reality that calls for innovative social interventions, the profession is challenged to find alternative strategies that will work and provide meaningful interventions that make a measurable difference to people's lives. The new philosophy of social development that is the focus of intervention as outlined in the White Paper for social welfare, calls for data and measurement of social conditions to be the key to accountable practice. However, as the white paper admits in several places, very little data exists to inform practice of those highly wanted benchmarks of success. Data comes from some form of measurement and it is therefore concluded in the absence of information, accountability becomes a difficult issue. Also, change and its measurement is in the absence of data only an illusion.

The authors have learnt from experience that measurement often does not feature in most direct practice contexts. Client assessments are often based on the practitioner's ability to interview whilst assessment as an activity in the helping process is regarded as an art based on "practice wisdom and experience". Although the interview is regarded as the most versatile and effective tool for gathering data about the client system, it is a method of assessment that has its own inherent bias and subjectivity. It thus happens that no two social workers will come to similar conclusions regarding the nature and extent of client problems and this lack of consistency seriously impact on the accountability of social work practice. The lack of consistency or reliability or even the validity of assessments is nowhere more rigorously questioned than in court settings where forensic reports are often questioned, criticised and even

rejected because of validity problems. In some instances the reports of social workers have even been rejected and are described as speculative and unfounded.

If the lack of consistency and accountability is true for direct practice contexts, it is equally applicable to macro practice situations such as the social development context, where assessments and interventions are influenced by an almost infinite number of environmental variables.

For some time a need has been identified with many social workers in practice, academics and scale developers, to begin formalising the use of social work assessment technologies such as scales and measurement instruments. Measurement has been around for some twenty years, as personified in the Heimler scale of Social Functioning and the Hudson Scales of social functioning. The use of these scales has instilled an interest for many practitioners who wanted more consistency in assessment. The increased use of these and other "rapid assessment instruments" has directly contributed to the need to structure and regulate the use of these technologies for practice.

Assessment in its broadest sense is defined as a series of processes during which data about client system are collected. The order in which this data is collected is in most contexts of great importance, as is the approach and tools that are used in the assessment process. These combinations that are followed greatly influences the quantity and quality of the "assessment product".

This paper aims to present a picture of the way in which progress has been made with promoting accountability in assessment practice. The paper will outline the initiatives of the SACSSP regarding the regulation of assessment technologies. A view of the future regarding assessment technology will also be presented.

ECOMETRICS IN CONTEXT

Why Ecometrics? So the questions no doubt arise, "Why Ecometrics?"; "Why measure?" The simple answer to this is that measurement is fundamental to assessment. As soon as we say that an individual client has a *significant* problem with finances, as soon as we say that one community has *less* 'voice' than another, as soon as we say that a group evidences *more* cohesion in this session than the previous session – as soon as we say any of these things we are measuring. And what we are measuring, as Dr Roestenburg has pointed out in the previous section, is an ecometric construct. Hence, we are doing ecometrics.

It is terrible important that we appreciate that ecometrics is not something new, something over and above what we already expect from social workers. The truth is that we all measure ecometric constructs all the time. Measurement is an integral part of our work. You will not read any process note or court report that does not involve measurement.

The problem is that much of our measurement is based on intuition, experience or hunches. Ecometrics, as a field, is important because it helps us standardise and systematise the way in which we measure. Ecometrics is a way of ensuring that the measurement rules we follow, often unconsciously, are consistent and rational.

Quantitative Measures. There are, of course, different ways to measure something. The most common and probably well-known form of measurement is through the use of quantitative, standardised, summated rating scales. The Hudson scales are a good example of this, as is the Heimler Scale. Quantitative measurement requires an instrument to have a number of characteristics before we can consider it to be a 'good' measuring instrument. Specifically, the scale should have reliability, validity and multicultural equivalence.

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure. An instrument should measure consistently over time and across people. If two people both have strong interpersonal skills, for example, they should both score high on a scale that measures interpersonal skills. If one scores high and the other scores low, the scale has poor reliability. Part of the value of quantitative measures is that they are able to produce reliable or consistent results across social workers. So two social workers assessing the same client should produce similar results – unfortunately, we can often not say this for regular psychosocial assessments.

Validity, the second characteristic of good quantitative measures, means that the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure and not something else. So, for instance, a scale that is intended to measure the perpetration of child abuse may in fact be measuring the ability to manipulate a quantitative measuring instrument. It would be important to ensure that this instrument really does measure the likelihood of child abuse before we can have any confidence in the scale score. Establishing the validity of a scale is much harder than establishing its reliability, but it is also much more important.

Finally, good quantitative measures demonstrate multicultural equivalence. This essentially means that the scale should perform in the same way across different cultures. This partially means that the instrument should be reliable and valid in each culture.

It also means that items in the scale should mean the same thing in each culture. I recently participated in developing a scale that measures spirituality. One of the items that was proposed had to do with regard for one's ancestors. The development team concluded that while this item would be a measure of spirituality for Africans, it would not be a measure of spirituality for Whites. It was therefore agreed that the item was culturally biased and was thus dropped from the scale.

Multicultural equivalence also means that high or low scores should mean the same thing in each culture. If a person in one culture has a happy marriage, while a person in another culture has a conflicted marriage, yet both get the same score on a marital satisfaction scale, the scale lacks multicultural equivalence. This characteristic is of critical importance in South Africa, but also difficult to establish.

Qualitative Measures. A second broad category of ecometrics is qualitative measurement. This area of measurement is less well developed in social work, but in psychology we will all be familiar with the Rorschach and the TAT. In practice, almost everything we do in assessment is qualitative. When we ask a client a question like, "Tell me about how you manage your finances?" we are in fact throwing out a projective technique – the client will determine how to answer the question and will project their own meaning onto it.

In social work the most common form of qualitative ecometrics is probably the structured assessment processes that many social workers use to collect assessment data. If you follow a fairly standard method of questioning and this method is followed by various social workers, this is ecometrics. This approach is probably followed in forensic work, where a systematic data collection process must be followed in order to ensure an unbiased and objective conclusion.

The qualities of reliability, validity and multicultural equivalence apply here as well, but reliability takes on a slightly different form. Reliability here primarily refers to interrater reliability. This means that two social workers, applying the same method, should generate similar conclusions. This is especially important in forensic work, where two social workers assessing the same client should produce similar recommendations. The court would regard the similarity of the recommendations as an indication of the objectivity and accuracy of the assessment process. This, of course, requires the method to be standardised or proceduralised. And it is this proceduralisation – the systematic, step-by-step delineation of the assessment procedure – that is perhaps the hallmark of good qualitative assessment.

REGULATION OF ECOMETRIC INSTRUMENTS

It has become increasingly apparent to the SACSSP, over the past few years, that there is a critical need to regulate the use of ecometric instruments. This is because some social workers utilise instruments that do not have reliability, validity or multicultural equivalence. For instance, we recently came across an instrument being used by a social work agency that purports to measure the suitability of a family to foster children. There is, however, no evidence that the reliability or validity of this instrument has been assessed, and so it is entirely possible that families who would make good foster families may 'fail' the test and be rejected.

Furthermore, some social workers use instruments in an unethical or unprofessional way. There are social workers who use instruments that they are not qualified to use or who do not know how to use them and thus reach incorrect conclusions and make poor recommendations.

But perhaps a more powerful driving force in the move towards the regulation of ecometrics was the need to promote the use of ecometrics within our profession. We see the use of ecometrics as a component of raising the professionalism of social work.

And so, over the past two years a group of interested social workers has met with the Council to formulate a position paper concerning ecometric and other measuring instruments. In April of this year the first formal meeting of the Ecometrics Committee was held. This committee has several main goals:

- ❖ To review and accredit ecometric instruments for use by social workers.
- ❖ To regulate the ethical use of ecometric and other instruments by social workers.
- ❖ To promote the use and development of ecometric instruments by social workers.
- ❖ To promote training in ecometrics among social workers.

As we are still a young committee, we have only just begun this process, and are currently focusing on the first of these four goals, viz the accreditation of instruments. We have developed an ecometric instrument assessment form that pulls together the most important ingredients of a good ecometric instrument. The person or organisation that either developed or distributes the instrument completes this form. The Ecometrics Committee then reviews the form, the instrument and the instrument manual, and determines whether the instrument can be accredited.

Instruments will be graded according to their measurement properties and their utilisation. For instance, we will distinguish instruments that can be used only in practice settings (to assess a client or evaluate intervention outcomes) from instruments that can be used in a high stakes setting (such as in court or in an occupational setting, where the results of the instrument may have a significant impact on the client's future).

Through this review and accreditation process, we hope to provide the social work profession with a list of instruments that have good measurement properties and that can, therefore, be used with confidence by social workers. We also hope that this will protect clients and communities from the use of substandard, unreliable or invalid instruments, particularly in a high stakes setting, such as in statutory or occupational social work. We consider this to be an important part of our social contract with the South African community.

Of course, the regulation of ecometric instruments is not and cannot be our only goal. Dr Roestenburg will further discuss the vision of the Ecometrics Committee.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

The committee has it upon itself to do everything possible to promote the use of assessment technology in Social Work practice. This does not only hold for direct practice with individuals or groups, but also for practice in communities. It is hoped that the efforts of the committee will ultimately enhance the credibility and standing of the profession amongst other service professions such as Psychology and Psychiatry, but also amongst social developers. Specifically the committee envisions the following:

- ❖ The regulation and accreditation of quantitative technologies such as scales by means of a worked out protocol as outlined above
- ❖ The development of a protocol for evaluating and accrediting qualitative technologies such as observation schedules, interview schedules, projective techniques and recognised assessment protocols, specifically in contexts such as the justice system.
- ❖ The committee will promote the training of social workers in accountable assessment practices. Currently, only one institution namely RAU offers such training in the form of extra curricular workshops. Unfortunately training in Accountable assessment and technology use as part of the graduate curriculum was omitted since the inception of a new curriculum with a slightly adjusted focus. Students not only evaluated this training as inspiring but they regarded training in assessment technology as a concrete contributor to practice competency. In this training students had to develop

their own scales as a practical exercise and for most this brought about a set of new insights regarding the use of technology in practice. Social work schools are therefore encouraged to take the leap into the future and begin training courses in accountable assessment and ecometrics and in this way contribute to the rapid development in the field of measurement in Social Work.

- ❖ Training in “ecometrics” is not mandatory at present, but the committee envisions that similar to the requirements for becoming a Psychologist, that Social Workers also need to be trained as “ecometrists” prior to their registration as Social Worker. Although the benefits of this future direction in the training of social workers are quite obvious, the logistics of such an exercise are equally obvious.
- ❖ Many new instruments need to be developed for different contexts. It is unfortunately true that too many scales that are used on a daily basis by practitioners are not standardised for our context. This situation calls for more rigorous scale development efforts, validation studies and co-ordinated research efforts to gather the necessary evidence to standardise instruments. Especially in the context of community practice, there is a lack of adequate measurement technology to accurately assess problems. The field of social indicators, programme indicators and simple community survey techniques needs to be embraced by practitioners and programme managers alike to develop measurement in these contexts. One system of Social Indicators developed by the author has been tested successfully in a community context, but further work needs to be done in this area. Training institutions should more rigorously seek opportunities to conduct validation studies on the many scales that social workers often use without knowing how valid these are.
- ❖ A library of scales and instruments, evidence and reports of validation studies will be developed at the Council’s offices. This resource will be the evidence base from which social workers can find information about scale, developers and suppliers.
- ❖ The committee will cooperate with various stake holders from practice such as in the Justice System, Clinical practice, community development and government to facilitate the development of a social validity evidence base. Such “evidence” will contribute to the accreditation of specifically qualitative assessment technologies.

CONCLUSIONS

The field of measurement, assessment technology and accountable assessment is a dynamic field, and a field that in different South African contexts currently receives a lot of attention. It is therefore of great importance that the Ecometrics committee and its activities receive the full support from practice and training institutions. The Ecometrics committee believes that on strength of the Council’s recognition of the importance of measurement in Social Work, that this committee should receive continued support from Academics and practitioners alike.

You are invited to contact the authors and the committee whenever information, guidelines for accountable practice or advice on assessment protocols or instruments are required. Contributing in this way, you will become co-responsible for permanently changing the assessment landscape in Social Work.