

IN THE CLASSROOM

Social Work Students Need to Use, Struggle With Primary Data

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In social work research, primary data is information collected directly from a source, often via survey, interview, observation, examination, or trial. It is regarded, quite simply, as the most reliable kind of data.

In social work education, primary data is no less valuable, but seemingly is not readily presented to students. This is regrettable. For teaching to be most successful, it is essential that students use and struggle with primary data. For example, in a class on social policy discussing the events surrounding the death of George Floyd, the class benefited by viewing the actual video of May 25, 2020, and reading the coroner's report and the Minnesota statutes defining 2nd- and 3rd- degree murder. Some students were understandably uncomfortable viewing the nine-minute video. Nonetheless, they instantly appreciated the value of primary data. They got to interpret it for themselves.

During the second impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, the class was presented with the House Resolution as well as the 75-page Trial Memorandum written by the attorneys to the 45th President. Once again,



it was a challenging yet wonderful experience. In clinical courses, students often are presented with “scenarios” written by individuals who are dealing with specific, real-life clinical issues. The scenarios help students specifically devise a strategy to help someone solve difficult, real-life problems. They are then asked to express in writing their communication with the individual as if they were

working with them face-to-face. These critical-thinking exercises serve as practice for future real-life clinical work. Feedback from students indicates that these classroom activities have helped prepare them to solve problems and dilemmas they may face in their professional lives.

Accurate information is essential for students looking to understand policy and practice. Primary data and secondary data

each have their pedagogical place. Primary data allows students to gain relevant insights into their clients—whether they are individuals, groups or institutions—that could not be gleaned by using only secondary data.

This is not to disparage secondary data. As long as it's reliable, the advantages of secondary data as a teaching tool are that it often can be located quickly and inexpensively, and it is



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readily shareable in many different formats. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with secondary data, though there may at times be concerns about its accuracy, how it was collected, and its overall dependability and latent bias.

Pros and Cons of Primary Data

The main positive benefit of primary data is that students can review original unfiltered materials. It affords them the ability to experience firsthand, unbiased materials and forces individual cognitive thinking. In other words, they must make up their own minds. This approach is not without drawbacks. Students may feel uncomfortable viewing or reading certain types of material. For instance, in a class that was exploring the problems of the criminal justice system, a short news clip was shown that featured a pregnant, mentally ill woman who had driven her van, containing her three children, into the ocean. The family had tried to

get help for this woman. They took her to a hospital, but she was ultimately discharged, despite her psychotic symptoms. She did not meet the strict involuntary commitment criteria and was released.

Fortunately, bystanders spotted the vehicle careening into the ocean and rescued the children before they were swept out to sea. One student subsequently requested a trigger warning for any future materials involving the potential harm of children. Relatedly, a “scenario” was presented to the class involving a real-life case of a teenager engaging in self-harm behaviors. Students were asked to provide specific advice and treatment strategies as to how they would assist this individual. One student was upset by the self-harm content and requested a trigger warning.

Counterintuitively, recent studies have indicated that trigger warnings are largely unhelpful and may even have the opposite effect, increasing anxiety instead of decreasing it.

(Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2020.) More pointedly, if students are unable to tolerate difficult materials in the classroom, it logically follows they will experience, at minimum, the same emotional response when faced with real-life clients in their professional lives. Whether trigger warnings help or hinder students and how they affect later practice in the field, to the best of our knowledge, has not been empirically tested. More research is needed to explore this complex topic.

One of Martin Luther King Jr.’s most famous quotes is “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Less famous, but equally profound, is what King said about education:

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.” (King, 1992, p. 124.)

Just as primary data collection is tailored to test a specific research hypothesis, it also can be used to encourage students to withhold judgment until they have put the primary data through a rigorous analysis. Without question, indoctrination is not education. 🎧

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