

THE FUTURE OF EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL WORK: AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW?

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Abstract: *This abbreviated article contains a brief overview of the contemporary state of evidence-based social work (EBSW) and projections of its likely future. The forecast is based upon a review and analysis of the current trends and themes reflected in books, journal articles, dissertations, conferences, university programs, centers, and resources available through the World Wide Web. The analysis suggests that the future of evidence-based practice (EBP) in social work is likely to be characterized by further evolution, clarification, and explication of the EBP perspective; continued growth in popularity and a commensurate increase in the number of publications about EBP; modest increase in the number of practice-relevant research studies conducted by social workers; slight decrease in the gap between research-based knowledge and actual practice; and continued polarization within the profession about the relative value and utility of evidence-based social work.*

Keywords: Evidence-Based Practice, Evidence-Based Social Work, EBP, EBSW, Future

WHAT IS EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL WORK?

The term evidence-based practice has been defined in various ways in social work (Mullen, 2002). Most definitions include reference to the quality or strength of evidentiary support for a particular practice. From this perspective, an "evidence-based practice is considered any practice that has been established as effective through scientific research according to some set of explicit criteria" (Mullen, 2004a, p. 8). Typically, these evaluative criteria include reference to the degree to which research studies that support the efficacy or effectiveness of a practice control for various threats to internal and external validity. In general, research designs that involve random selection and assignment processes and the comparison of treatment versus control groups are highly valued. Contemporary definitions, however, also incorporate reference to professional expertise, ethical principles, and clients' values, needs, and preferences. For example, McNeece and Thyer (2004) suggested that "Evidence-based practice can be defined as the integration of the best research evidence with clinical expertise and client values in making practice decisions" (p. 9). Cournoyer (2004) proposed the following definition of evidence-based social work:

Evidence-based social work is the mindful and systematic identification, analysis, and synthesis of practice effectiveness as a primary part of an integrative and collaborative process concerning the selection and application of service to members of target client groups. The evidence based decision-making process includes consideration of professional ethics and experience as well as the personal and cultural values and judgments of consumers. (p. 4)

These definitions reflect the importance of searching for, analyzing, and applying the

currently available best evidence in an attempt to serve clients in an effective manner. A several step, sequential process is involved: (1) Questioning, (2) Searching, (3) Analyzing, and (4) Applying and Evaluating (Cournoyer, 2004). In effect, these steps involve critical thinking and scholarship. They also reflect values of integrity and altruism. Social workers are expected to place the interests of clients before their own, base their professional activities on an established knowledge base, and incorporate clients' needs, values, and preferences in the decision-making process. Indeed, evidence-based social workers are highly interested in both *ideographic* and *nomothetic* knowledge (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002).

Ideographic information is typically gained through the use of individualized and standardized scales along with client and constituent reports within the context of single-system research designs. Research-mindedness is needed during the working and evaluating processes to ensure that services shown to be generally effective through nomothetic research are also effective when provided to a particular individual, couple, family, group, organization, or community.

Gilgun (2005) encouraged professionals to view evidence—whether nomothetic or ideographic—as tentative or provisional, to actively seek information that contradicts or “falsifies” currently held positions, and to willingly revise conclusions on the basis of all relevant knowledge. She argued that, “Processes of falsification lead to inclusiveness and are a check on bias and blind spots, which is one of the main purposes of a scientific approach and a goal of EBP” (p. 52). This openness to unlearning and relearning based upon evidence may be contrasted with “authority-based” (Gambrell, 1999, 2001) attitudes through which information remains essentially unexamined and often unchallenged—perhaps due to tradition or the status of the source.

ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE OF EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL WORK

Based upon current and historical trends in the profession, the future of evidence-based practice in social work is likely to be characterized by several themes. These include: (1) evolution and clarification of the EBP perspective to further explicate decision-making processes in general and especially the means by which clients participate as informed consumers and collaborative partners; (2) continued growth in the popularity of EBP and the number of books, book chapters, practice guidelines, treatment manuals, and theoretical and practical articles about EBP and its application in practice and education; (3) modest increase in the number of practice-relevant research studies conducted by social workers accompanied by a continued dramatic growth in those conducted by professionals in medicine, psychology, nursing, and allied health; (4) increased ease of access to the research literature; and (5) slight decrease in the gap between research-based knowledge and actual practice.

Evolution and Clarification of the Evidence-Based Perspective

Evidence-based practice in social work will evolve conceptually and empirically to incorporate greater attention to the processes by which decisions about the quality, value, relevance, and applicability of evidence are made. The means by which social workers attend to the idiosyncratic needs, values, and preferences of specific individuals and diverse population groups will be further explicated as will the processes by which potential clients

become informed consumers who participate actively in collaborative decision-making.

A fundamental principle of the informed consent process in evidence-based practice involves the provision of accurate information to potential clients about the potential risks and benefits, and the likely effectiveness of applicable services. Of course, many consumers independently seek information about the efficacy of various programs and practices to empower themselves as they "comparison shop" for services offered by different professionals and organizations. Unfortunately, many people remain information illiterate and depend solely upon professionals to provide information upon which to base decisions about the likely safety and effectiveness of various services. The processes by which potential clients become genuinely informed consumers will be clarified and explicated as EBSW evolves (Entwistle, Sheldon, Sowden, & Watt, 1998).

Growth in Publications about and Popularity of the Evidence-Based Social Work

Evidence-based practice has generated enormous attention throughout the social work global community during the last decade. In the United Kingdom especially, numerous organizations have been created to promote EBP throughout the social care system (e.g., Be-Evidence-Based, Research in Practice: Supporting Evidence Informed Practice with Children and Families, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), Social Work Research Center at the University of Stirling, Electronic Library for Social Care (eLSC), and the Centre for Evidence-Based Social Services (CEBSS):

Evidence-based social work in the United States has grown more slowly than in the United Kingdom. However, many social work educators, policy makers, agency administrators, and some practitioners are becoming increasingly interested in EBP. This growing popularity may be accounted for by several factors. For example, many social workers now consider it their ethical obligation (Myers & Thyer, 1997; NASW, 1999) to inform clients about the potential risks, benefits, and likely effectiveness of applicable services (Joint Initiative of Mental Health Professional Organizations, 2000) and, whenever possible, to provide services that reflect the greatest probability of helping consumers achieve agreed-upon goals. Mandated by accreditation standards (CSWE, 2001), a growing number of schools and departments of social work are attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and have based curricula decisions on evidence derived from their evaluation studies. In addition, the faculties of some have adopted evidence-based practice as a major focus of students' learning (see, for example, the George Warren Brown School of Social Work of Washington University in St. Louis).

Evidence-based practice is also gaining in popularity because of other external pressures as well. "For most of the profession's history, there were very few internal or external mandates that held practitioners accountable for the efficacy of their professional interventions" (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002, pp. 798-799). Clearly, this is no longer the case. Social workers and the programs they staff are increasingly held to rigorous standards of accountability.

Managed care processes tend to encourage the provision of services that reflect research-based evidence of safety, effectiveness, and efficiency. Consumers and their families individually and collectively have lost much of their "trust" of professionals and increasingly

demand accountability. Other constituents (e.g., private and public funding sources, legislatures, boards of directors, and citizens' watch groups) are also demanding greater accountability as indicated by positive outcomes. Social work practitioners and organizations are subject to an increasing number of lawsuits—some of which are based upon provision of unsafe, unproven, or inappropriate services.

Methodological and technological advances also fuel the growth of EBP. The evolution of both single-system and meta-analytic research methods, and the development relatively user-friendly software to maintain, analyze, and analyze data contribute to the ease with which both nomothetic and ideographic research may be undertaken. The continuing, fast-growing base of empirical knowledge about effective biopsychosocial policies, programs, practices, and interventions; and the expansion of online, electronic information resources facilitate access to research-based knowledge.

As a result of these and other factors, the popularity of evidence-based social work in the United States will also grow—albeit probably at a slower rate and to a lesser extent than in our sister professions of medicine, nursing, and psychology. The number of published books, book chapters, practice guidelines, treatment manuals, articles, and reports about EBP in social work will continue to grow as they have in the past several years.

A keyword search of the Social Work Abstracts (SWABS) electronic bibliographic database using the terms “evidence-based” or “evidence based” produced nearly 70 citations. Three citations appeared in 1998, 4 in 1999, 8 in 2000, 8 in 2001, 10 in 2002, 13 in 2003, and 19 through June 2004. A similar keyword search of the Social Services Abstracts (SSA) database yielded 191 English language journal articles. Three citations appeared in 1998, 8 in 1999, 23 in 2000, 29 in 2001, 24 in 2002, 59 in 2003, and 23 through August 2004. A keyword search of Bowker's Global Books-in-Print online database, the United States Library of Congress online catalog, and the World Wide Web for recent books related to EBP in social work yielded 19 books (Barrett & Ollendick, 2004; Bilson, 2004; Briggs & Rzepnicki, 2004; Corcoran, 2000, 2003; Cournoyer, 2004; CWLA, 2003; Dulmus & Sowers, 2004; Gibbs, 2003; Glickin, 2004; Hilarski, 2005; Macdonald, 2001; Newman, 2004; Roberts & Yeager, 2004; Rosen & Proctor, 2003; Smith, 2005; Thyer & Kazi, 2004; Vincent, 2000; Wodarski & Dziegielewski, 2002). The publication of books by and for social workers about evidence-based practice has quadrupled during the period from 2000 to 2004.

Although the majority of books and book chapters thus far produced have focused on the “what” and “how” of EBP, we anticipate a significant growth in the number of books that incorporate systematic reviews and meta-analyses of practice-relevant research studies for specific social problems and populations. Some of these may include summaries of practices in sufficient detail that they may adopted for use in replication studies or actually applied in service to clients. Evidence-based practice guidelines and treatment manuals will also be published in increasing numbers. Many will be available as books or book chapters in print and electronic format, and others will be freely accessible via the World Wide Web. For example, the United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has established the National Guideline Clearinghouse (NGC) at <http://www.guidelines.gov> to facilitate professionals' access to and evaluation of guidelines that meet a certain standard of quality. Although most are geared toward healthcare practices, several would support social workers

in their service as well (e.g., Substance Abuse Treatment for Persons with Child Abuse and Neglect Issues; HIV Infection: Detection, Counseling, and Referral; Elderly Suicide).

In the field of mental health, psychiatry and psychology have taken the lead in the development and dissemination of practice guidelines. Many are available through the website of the American Psychiatric Association at <http://www.psych.org> and some are available through the American Psychological Association's website at <http://www.apa.org>. Although the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) publishes policy statements (see, for example, those abstracted on the "Policy Statements Abstracts" page at <http://www.socialworkers.org/resources/abstracts/default.asp>), some standards for practice, and several "clinical indicators" (see, for example, the "Practice" page at <http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/default.asp>), a search of the NASW website in December 2004 did not produce any practice guidelines derived from systematic reviews of the research literature. However, the number of published practice guidelines and manuals that directly or indirectly apply to social work will undoubtedly continue to increase at a substantial rate (see, for example, Allness & Knoedler, 1998; Barlow, 2001; Barrett & Ollendick, 2004; Budney & Higgins, 1998; Carroll, 1998; Corcoran, 2003; Foa, Keane, & Friedman, 2000; Henggeler, Borduin, Schoenwald, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998; LeCroy, 1994; Meichenbaum, 1995; Mercer & Woody, 1999; Miller, 1995; Roberts & Yeager, 2004; Saunders, Berliner, & Hanson, 2001; Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1996; Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1998; White, 1999a, 1999b).

The growing number of practice guidelines and treatment manuals based upon systematic reviews of the research may advance the quality of care to consumers—if widely disseminated, easily accessed, and prepared in practitioner-friendly fashion,. However, in addition to evidence-based practice guidelines and manuals, we will also see an increase in those unsupported by research. Social workers and other helping professionals that are unfamiliar with the knowledge base and do not read critically, may unwittingly adopt guidelines and manuals that lack evidentiary support and are, essentially, based upon the opinions of their authors.

Practice Relevant Research

There will be continued growth in the number of both primary and meta-analytic research studies that relate to the efficacy and effectiveness of various policies, programs, practices, and interventions—including some that evaluate the effectiveness of evidence-based practice itself. Most of these practice-relevant research studies will be conducted and published by researchers and practitioners in medicine, psychology, nursing, sociology, and allied professions. We can also expect an increase in such research by social workers. Encouraged by the efforts of the Society for Social Work Research and Practice (SWRR); the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR); the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH); the editors, boards, and contributors to journals such as *Social Work Research*, *Research on Social Work Practice*, and the new *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, and those of several social work research centers. The proposed National Center for Social Work Research Act (H.R. 844) would contribute substantially as well. However, its passage in the near future appears unlikely.

In general, the rate of growth and the overall production of practice-relevant research by social workers will continue to be modest in comparison to those of other disciplines and professions. Despite the fact that the United States has at least 600,000 college-educated, employed social workers, only a tiny percentage conduct and publish research studies. Although schools and departments of social workers graduate approximately 30,000 social work students each year, only 300 or so receive doctoral degrees. Doctoral-level social workers—trained in research methods—could conduct and publish practice-relevant research studies. However, relatively few social work dissertations involve research of the effectiveness of policies and practices. An index search of the Social Work Abstracts (SWABS) electronic database identified 2556 social work dissertations completed during the period from November 1977 through May 2004. A scan of the titles revealed only a small number that involved the effectiveness or efficacy of policies, programs, practices, or interventions. The overwhelming majority of social work dissertation studies could be considered sociological or anthropological in nature—often involving surveys of or interviews with members of various special population groups. Based upon the titles, relatively few social work dissertations directly contribute to the knowledge based needed to support evidence-based practice.

The situation is similar in our social work journals. In an examination of 1849 articles published in 13 social work journals during the period from 1993 to the middle of 1997, the reviewers found that less than half (47%) could be classified as research articles. Of those, approximately 85% involved explanatory or descriptive research. Some 126 articles (about 15 percent of the 863 research articles or slightly less than 7% of all 1849 articles) involved studies of interventions in relation to outcomes. Unfortunately, only 42% of the 126 intervention studies were described with sufficient specificity to allow replication (Rosen, Proctor, & Staudt, 1999).

Consistent with its traditions, the profession of social work in the future will continue to make modest contributions to the knowledge based needed for effective practice. Social workers who consume research-based knowledge will rely primarily on findings from studies conducted by other professionals.

Access to Research Literature

The information and technology explosion will continue to extend both the amount of research literature available to social workers and the ease by which it may be accessed. The number of online, electronic bibliographic databases with full-text accessibility will expand and the cost for access will decrease. In addition to the large fee-based bibliographic databases currently available, free services will emerge to aid those helping professionals and organizations interested in improving the quality and effectiveness of their policies, programs, and practices. Most of these will be interdisciplinary in nature and dominated by health and allied health professions (see, for example, MEDLINE/PubMed at <http://www.pubmed.gov>; the National Library of Medicine at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>; the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [SAMSHA] Mental Health Information Center at <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov> and the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information [NCADI] at <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov>;

the National Health Service [NHS] Centre for Reviews and Dissemination [DRD] at <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd> and the Cochrane Library at <http://www.thecochranelibrary.com>). However, the number of specialized online, electronic bibliographic services useful for evidence-based social work will also grow (see, for example, the Campbell Collaboration [C2] Library with its Social, Psychological, Educational & Criminological Trials Register [C2-SPECTR] and C2 Reviews of Interventions, and Policy Evaluations [C2-RIPE]) at <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>, the Electronic Library for Social Care [eLSC] at <http://www.elsc.org.uk>, and Be Evidence-Based at <http://www.be-evidence-based.com>).

We also anticipate the development of social work notification systems through which policy makers, administrators, and practitioners receive electronic updates about research studies that pertain to their particular areas of interest. Healthcare professionals have long been able to receive timely notification of current research via electronic newsletters (see, for example, the various medical specialty newsletters available through www.medscape.com; PsychiatryMatters NewsWatch via <http://www.psychiatrymatters.md>; the Psych-Watch Newsletter at <http://www.psychwatch.com>; the NCADI Update via <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/promos/ncadiupdate>). Several professional journals currently email interested readers tables of contents of forthcoming issues (see, for example, the table of contents electronic alert system available through NASW Press at <http://ninetta.naswpressonline.org> and Sage Publication's at <http://online.sagepub.com>). Increasingly, social workers will be able to access online, electronic bibliographic information and indeed the full-text of practice-relevant research articles, books, and book chapters. Furthermore, the search and retrieval processes will become ever more user-friendly.

Applying Research to Practice

The continuing explosion in and growing ease of access to the research literature and evidence-based practice guidelines or treatment manuals, growing constituent demands for effective practices, and increased efforts by some educators (Mullen, 2004b; Rosen, 1996) and some schools and departments of social work to teach skills needed to implement EBP (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003) will modestly reduce the substantial gap between the actual practices of social workers and the research-based evidence of what works. We hope that social workers—individually and collectively through journal clubs, study groups, and practice research networks—will avail themselves of these information resources and incorporate program and practice evaluation processes in efforts to improve the quality of service to clients. However, we do not anticipate a dramatic reversal in previous patterns. Survey studies of social workers' use of the professional literature in general and research studies in particular support the conclusion that only a small percentage of social workers regularly read scholarly publications and apply research findings research in service. "Social work practitioners are unlikely to have the time, inclination, support, or resources to either read research or integrate it into their day-to-day practice" (Holosko & Leslie, 1998, pp. 436-447). For some time to come, relatively few social workers in the United States will access, understand, critically analyze, and apply practice-relevant knowledge in their service to clients in need.

CONCLUSION

Since its origins during the late 1800's, social work has been characterized by internal conflict and polarization. We social workers have disagreed among ourselves about almost every conceivable issue—including our primary mission and goals, and the means by which they should be pursued. It is hardly surprising that many social workers—perhaps especially those who serve as educators in schools and departments of social work—disagree about the value of evidence-based practice and the assumptions upon which it is based. The current and historical evidence suggests that conflict and polarization about EBP—and many other issues—will continue for the foreseeable future.

Despite continued challenges to its legitimacy, evidence-based practice in social work will evolve conceptually and empirically to incorporate greater attention to the particular needs, values, and preferences of particular individuals and specific population groups. The popularity of evidence-based social work among social workers will also grow—albeit probably at a slower rate and to a lesser extent than in our sister professions of medicine, nursing, and psychology. In general, we anticipate modest progress toward idealized aspirations of an emerging generation of social workers who are, in essence, scholarly, research-minded professionals who routinely access, review, understand, and analyze the practice-relevant research literature; apply research findings to their practice; and evaluate the process and outcomes of their services through time-series or single-system designs (Mullen & Bacon, 2004).

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