Preface

BACKGROUND

This book is written for the beginning and experienced social worker alike in the hope that they will find new ideas and approaches relevant to their practice. The term “advanced practice” is used to refer to social workers who attend to the systems that surround their own practice, including the team and organisational setting. The term is used to acknowledge the way in which social workers develop across the life span with matured insights influencing their practice over time. The literature notes a tendency for beginning social workers to focus predominantly on the interpersonal dynamics in the therapeutic relationship with service-users and their families that is enriched by a socio-political critique later in their career (Pack, 2010b).

The approaches to evidence-based practice in social work have been undergoing widespread debate and controversy in recent years with critiques in the professional journals of social work evident from the 1990s and continuing today. The evidence-based models derived from medicine, which were developed from the early 1990s onwards, have been criticised by some social work theorists for their acceptance of a “top down,” expert-knows-best approach. Whether this characterisation of evidence-based practice, at least as it was originally understood, is correctly construed, certainly any top-down model is inappropriate to social work’s central ethos, ethics, and key tasks, which emphasise a collaborative supportive relationship with clients and an underlying social justice and human rights focus. Attending to the individual, family systems, and wider social communities of which the client is a core requirement of what social workers do. This systemic approach, deriving from the person-in-environment perspective, involves an imperative for a continuing political as well as social critique of the structures that surround the individual client and the social work profession itself. The evidence-based debate forms a wider part of this ongoing critique of the power inherent in social work roles. This critique suggests that as social workers we need to critically reflect with our colleagues, peers, and clinical supervisors about how we exercise power and authority as social workers within our professional roles and agencies in relation to service-users and their families. Therefore, to work in collaboration with service-users and their families and the social structures that surround them, social work theorists, such as Gambrill (2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013) and Thyer (2004, 2008) have developed models that contextualise the use of evidence-based research to social work to effectively adapt, and in some cases refocus, more traditionally medically based models of evidence-based practice.
The book’s title, *Evidence Discovery and Assessment*, may lead the reader to conclude that searching for practice evidence and assessing the relevance and quality of the research found are two discrete and distinct processes and activities when in reality they are interrelated. Ethical social work practitioners aim for assessment to be a collaborative endeavour in which the approaches and goals of contact are formulated in relationship with clients and their teams. Assessment also has a therapeutic value and in critical reflective paradigms is conceptualised as ongoing, with the service-user, caregiver, or family evaluating with the social worker whether, and to what extent, the chosen approach is working to meet the service-user’s defined goals. In addition to this, assessment protocols in an agency context are seen as needing to be consistent with the organisational policy and the professional ethics and values held by the social worker. In this sense, assessment is a dynamic and reflexive process in which the social worker and client and supervisor form a triad, their work together involving reflection, action, and evaluation in a continuous cycle. Assessment encompasses the social worker’s theoretical framework for practice, so all these elements together guide the nature of the practice modality and intervention to adapt to the unfolding needs of the client whether the “client” is an individual, group, or whole community.

**THE STORY OF HOW THE BOOK CAME TO BE**

The initial idea for this book came from an earlier collaboration I had with the allied health staff of the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI). In 2007, Professor Karen Grimmer-Somers, a physiotherapy academic, was compiling a reader on searching for and applying evidence-based literature in the allied health professions. Professor Grimmer-Somers asked if I would like to contribute to a book she was editing, involving a range of contributors with differing professional training and backgrounds, including physiotherapy, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. Titled * Practical Tips to Finding the Evidence: An Allied Health Reader* (Grimmer-Somers, 2009), this edited reader was aimed at assisting new allied health practitioners and those more experienced to develop their research skills for practice. The intention was to equip allied health professionals to find research literature that could be applied continuously to improve practice in such fields as speech pathology, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy. The emphasis of practice in these allied health professions, derived from models prevalent in medicine, involves evidence-based searching techniques grounded in the ranking of research studies methodologically, with randomised controlled trials being seen as the “gold standard.” The reviewed research studies located through electronic database searches are then seen as constituting a body of evidence to be applied to a specific case. The aim of the book was, therefore, to teach busy allied health professionals how to find evidence, assess its quality, and then apply the findings in terms of relevance to solving a specific case issue or dilemma. The quality of research studies was considered in relation to sample size and whether the study could be replicated with the same results, so was very much tied to rigour in methodology.

In the context of *Practical Tips to Finding the Evidence*, I was invited to compose a chapter about the key tasks for social work in mental health issues from my practice experience (Pack, 2009) and advised that the technical team at JBI would then run an electronic database search and from this search find evidence to guide practice in relation to a complex case study. The direction from the editor was to formulate a number of practice questions that could be answered by the evidence-based research literature on the topic. As many complex cases have no concrete answers but are usefully informed by the research literature, I remained very curious about what the search would reveal regarding my case study.
In assessing the evidence for *Practical Tips to Finding the Evidence*, I found the technical team supporting the writing of our chapters at JBI approached their search in a very different way from the one I would have adopted. The technical team at JBI preferred to focus the searches for the book on large-scale quantitative research and systematic reviews, in a ranked hierarchy of evidence in relation to the efficacy of interventions for particular diagnoses. I realised this to be the prevailing scientific method for assessing quality of evidence, determining which studies were worthy of inclusion. I also understood this to be the model preferred when assessing the efficacy of medical interventions and approaches, but I wondered how social work as a profession might run this search, assess quality, and use the “evidence” to guide practice.

A question I pondered was whether the concept of what constitutes “evidence” has the same definition and meaning across different professions in allied health. The experience of writing this chapter suggested that social work and other relational therapies, such as counselling and psychotherapy, approach the evaluation of the effectiveness of different interventions differently. Social work uses a broader definition both of what constitutes “evidence” and of what kinds of research findings are considered relevant to practice. I noted that social workers referred to techniques and new literature used in practice across a range of practice environments from a wider range of sources, including small-scale qualitative studies that dealt with a very broad range of issues influencing the practice environment. Practice research in social work focuses on the legal context, work place, and team, all of which influence the practitioner and his or her framework for practice. This framework for practice is actively constructed from years of experience within a particular field and is tailored to the individual service-user, family, and group. Practice wisdom, theory, personal and professional values, and the social worker’s ethics and moral judgement are woven together. This fabric constructed over time is then available for the social worker to use and so form part of the “evidence” drawn upon for directions within contact with clients.

Other concerns of the social work research literature related to what was “relevant” theory to particular client problems, the values the social worker brings to practice, personal as well as professional ethics, the nature of the client’s presentation, and the practice wisdom of the individual practitioner which develops from seeing many clients across time. The organisational setting, policies, and practices, the prevailing socio-economic and political contexts, and the influence of culture are other variables social workers attend to in their practice. Clinical supervision from within a critical reflective paradigm and the service-users’ or consumers’ and their caregivers’ goals, narratives, and resources also feature prominently in social work literature which ultimately shape one’s practice.

As a consequence of these reflections upon the nature of social work practice, its anti-oppressive, holistic orientation, and the use of self of the practitioner, I realised that there were underpinning values to conducting any literature-based search. Considerations about what constitutes “evidence” were less clear-cut in social work and so needed to be defined at the outset and at every stage of the search process from question formulation through to application and evaluation. Therefore, the idea of a book devoted to the information needs of social work practitioners who approach the search for and application of “evidence” to inform practice was born. Out of these deliberations, a number of fellow academics and practice collaborators were approached to contribute to the debate. In their chapters, it is possible to see the influences and roles of ethics, values, and the holistic and anti-oppressive practices, which shape evidence-informed practice for social work.
The second major driver to the writing of this book came from my collaborator in teaching a national post-graduate programme to allied health students at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. Justin Cargill, a reference and subject librarian, and I had collaborated together to teach students the value of researching for their practice assignments. During orientation week our allied health post-graduate students, who were working in hospitals around New Zealand, would study on campus during a five-day intensive (Pack, 2010a). During these five days, the broad approaches taught in the year long programme were outlined and illustrated with practice examples. As part of this orientation, the library session covered the literature searching process, including the use of key terms, creating effective search strategies, the importance of systematically recording search strategies, and assessing the records from each search. This half-day workshop provided students with the tools for approaching research needed for essay writing and problem-based learning. In the problem-based learning which was delivered online I posed various clinical dilemmas common to the experience of working in the mental health services. As a consequence of using this approach to skill-building in searching for evidence to apply to practice, we noted that students not only began to undertake research on their assignment topics but were doing so more systematically when they had attended this workshop (Pack, 2010a). For example, the allied health post-graduates we were teaching began to demonstrate their confidence in critiquing the prevailing theories about DSM diagnoses from a cultural and service-user standpoint (Pack, 2013). During the library orientation, we showed students how to locate the practice research related to clients, caregivers, and families, along with more traditional sources.

The third impetus for writing this book is the ever-changing nature of social work theory and its relationship to the use of professional self in practice. As social workers are eclectic in their use of theory, these theoretical foundations are an important foundation for practice and are themselves adapted through social workers’ intuition, decision-making, and experience. Theory for practice in social work provides a lens for viewing all research for relevance and applicability, as well as revealing gaps where there is not yet any theory or if the theory is only partly formulated. The social work theories most often drawn upon by social workers include ecological systems, narrative, and strengths-based, anti-oppressive/emancipatory, and critical theory. Each of these theories has a role to contribute in structuring the evidence-informed practice discourses as the chapters of this book illustrate. As social work adopts a broad, integrative approach to practice as a profession, social work practitioners select parts of each theory to construct for themselves a coherent framework in working with clients. Evidence in this sense can be considered to inform and refine this framework for practice, representing not one theory or approach but a bricolage of many.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Section 1: Framing the Search for Evidence

To demonstrate practically how the research evidence can inform practice, Section 1 of this book is comprised of four foundational chapters. These chapters offer a framework for guiding practitioners wanting to systematically search, find, assess, and apply literature from research to guide their practice. Chapter 1, “Why Search for Evidence for Practice in Social Work?” provides a framework to assess what is “evidence.” It deals with the controversy surrounding what constitutes “evidence” for social work practice and its practitioners. Building on this understanding, Chapter 2 outlines step-by-step how to
locate and evaluate research evidence. Chapter 3 describes some of the considerations regarding how to apply evidence across different practice settings, domains, and jurisdictions as a social worker. The social worker’s understanding and use of professional self and intuition is included in this process. Chapter 4, “Navigating Practice-Informed Evidence and Evidence-Based Practice,” distinguishes between the two terms on the basis of there being competing claims to knowledge based in an analysis of the underlying power dynamics underlying these discourses. These discourses position the relationship between social worker and service-user differently and are themselves informed by the multi-theoretical perspectives that social workers work from. These theories of practice drawn upon by social workers in their practice include ecological systems, critical-reflective, strengths-based, cultural, and service-user theories of recovery. Therefore, in Section 1 of the book, the notion of what constitutes “evidence” is assessed in interaction with social work theory, service-user, cultural perspectives, and multi-disciplinary practice.

**Section 2: Social Work Fields of Practice**

With this understanding of the spiralling nature of the assessment-practice nexus, Section 2 of the book addresses specific fields of practice and the application of practice-evidence within those fields. Chapters 5 to 13 address many of the major contexts of practice in which social workers operate. The aim of these chapters is to illustrate through description of a practice issue or dilemma how evidence may guide and advance practice in that field.

These contexts of practice include refugee and resettlement issues for women in Chapter 5 and mental health and the impact of multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration in client service provision and well-being in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 is written by a social work academic familiar with the many challenges of child protection social work in remote rural and Aboriginal communities in Alice Springs, Australia. This chapter outlines sociologist Everett Hughes’ (1951, 1962) foundational notion of “dirty work” and applies this concept to the child protection social work role. Chapter 8 deals with young men and the rehabilitation of young offenders in the United Kingdom’s criminal justice system.

Chapter 9 describes an outcome evaluation of social work services across health and child protection domains to conclude that improved outcomes are obtained when social workers are offering services within a multi-disciplinary team. Chapter 10 explores the assessment and treatment considerations when approaching therapy with adult sexual abuse survivors. Guided by evidence-based literature, the author attends to the stages of recovery from trauma with women who have experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Chapter 11 focuses on a mixed methods quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the services offered within neurosurgical wards and post-discharge in the community. The services provided by social workers to address the wider psychosocial needs of service-users and their families and caregivers demonstrate how social work services integrated into any multi-disciplinary team effort enhance satisfaction and outcomes for service-users and their families. Chapter 12, guided by the research literature, builds a model for social workers who work with men and explores the emphasis on mothering in the research literature. This review and the authors’ own research emphasises the need to update the knowledge base to include the role of fathers, thus reconceptualising our understanding of what constitutes parenting within families in the 21st century. Chapter 13 outlines the author’s work as an art therapist in remote Aboriginal communities, working in partnership with the local elders and Aboriginal artists. In this context, the author deconstructs Western concepts in art and trauma-informed therapy using Smith’s (1999) groundbreaking “decolonising methodologies” to address her own practices as an art therapist to facilitate cultural regeneration in Aboriginal communities where children and their families are experiencing intergenerational trauma.
Section 3: Self-Care for Social Workers

Section 3 of this book (Chapters 14-17) addresses fields of self-care for social workers from within the research literature. Chapter 14 deals with the use and theories attached to clinical supervision. Clinical supervision was developed within the founding work of Kadushin (1957, 1968) and has been shaped since by a variety of social work theorists. Chapter 15 explores the organisational responses to social workers who face critical incidents, developing a model that aims to prevent and ameliorate compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation from critical events in the workplace. The theories underpinning critical incident stress management programmes are explored and extrapolated into a model for social workers working in the NGO and statutory sectors. Finally, Chapter 16 deals with spirituality as an advanced competency in social work practice. Drawing on the evidence-informed literature and personal experiences in community, the author discusses how spirituality in the social worker’s everyday life can be used to enhance professional and personal effectiveness and wellbeing. Secondly, spirituality is discussed as a means of ensuring that social workers attend to their clients’ sense of spirituality and its role in their healing. The conclusion, Chapter 17, brings the various sections together to pose the question, “What have we learned?”

CONCLUSION: HOW THE BOOK IMPACTS THE FIELD

In each chapter, the authors bring a wealth of experience as social work practitioners working in the fields they describe alongside their research backgrounds. As researcher-practitioners, they bring a depth of understanding of the ways in which the research literature can assist in guiding our practice with clients on multiple levels: including the families, support networks, groups, and institutions that surround individual clients in their local communities.

In order to illustrate especially important aspects of assessment and intervention in each field of practice, cases encountered in the authors’ practice are presented within each chapter relating to a field of social work practice. In all instances, client identity has been rigorously protected by altering some combination of details involving adjustments to age, ethnicity, and circumstances. This process of assembling composite case studies is achieved by summarising and then adjusting the reported circumstances of a range of clients with differing histories but with the same presenting issues. These details are then discussed in terms of the personal narratives gathered from several individual clients, elements of which are condensed into a single narrative. Every effort has, therefore, been made by the authors to de-identify actual cases from their practice.

The “cases” used to illustrate are not always related to client presentations but rather to programmes, an analysis of organisational policies, practices, and the law to reveal gaps in service provision and ethical dilemmas. This broader view of practice in which the worker looks systemically at the institutions and their policies is often associated with social workers who are working in areas where there are conflicting policies and ambiguities in the legal frameworks for practice.

This book is also offered for social work educators and their students to teach the basics of how to find and apply evidence-based practice in their day-to-day work. The reader, whether an advanced practitioner or a beginning social worker, is invited to engage with the authors in their search to answer key dilemmas in their practice. I hope that students, their educators, and new, as well as seasoned, practitioners are encouraged to approach and use the research literature more confidently, to assess quality of evidence,
and to learn how to apply and theorise about the practice dilemmas raised. These chapters are offered as critical-reflections on practice and as such represent a “snap shot” of major themes discovered in the empirical and conceptual research literature. Just as Kadushin (1999) reminds us, social work is a dynamic, ever-changing profession as it responds and interacts with its environment. In this sense, this book and each book chapter is of necessity a work in progress.

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REFERENCES


