

Reflections on Evidence Based Practice Criticisms: Updating Today's Social Worker

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Abstract

As the emphasis on evidence-based practice and evidence-based research in the field of social work continues to grow, it is increasingly pertinent that today's social worker is well-versed in its on-going debate, its theoretical strengths and limitations, its store of resources, and the state of its current adoption. As such, this essay specifically explores the arguments associated with resistance to and issues of changing to the evidence-based practice model, namely that the field is not prepared in terms of resources for such an overarching paradigm change. This concern is addressed as objectively as possible, acknowledging both the preparation and potential benefits of evidence-based practice, but also the reality of its limitations. Ultimately, this exploration is intended to dissolve misconceptions of the adaptation to evidence-based practice, minimize unnecessary resistance to change, and finally, achieve an increased understanding of the pending limitations of applying evidence-based practice to the field of social work and to social interventions.

As the emphasis on evidence-based practice and evidence-based research in the field of social work continues to grow, it is increasingly pertinent that today's social worker is well-versed in its on-going debate, its theoretical strengths and limitations, its store of resources, and the state of its current adoption. Mullen and Streiner (2004) expressed in their review of the evidence for and against evidence-based practice, "It is probably safe to say that no innovation has generated as much argument and heat as the introduction of evidence-based practice (EBP) and policy" (p. 111). On the pro-side, EBP is heralded as a substantial advancement toward better practice and policymaking in healthcare, education, criminal justice, and human services (e.g., Gambrill, 1999; Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002; Gray, 2001; Macdonald, 1999; Marshall, 1995; Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997; as cited in Mullen & Streiner, 2004). The counter-argument, however, maintains certain reservations and criticisms of EBP. Straus and McAlister (2000) developed an extensive classification of the criticisms against evidence-based medicine, which most reviewers cite extensively as indicative of the counter-arguments and misconceptions of EBP in general; these limitations and misperceptions are summarized as follows:

Two types of limitations were identified: those applying to medical practice in general (shortage of coherent, consistent scientific evidence; difficulties in applying evidence to the care of individual patients; and barriers to the practice of high-quality medicine) and those applying specifically to EBM (the need to develop new skills; limited time and resources; and paucity of evidence that EBM works). Criticisms resulting from misperceptions of EBM were identified as being that it (1) denigrates clinical expertise, (2) ignores patients' values and preferences, (3) promotes a "cookbook" approach to medicine, (4) is simply a cost-cutting tool, (5) is an ivory-tower concept, (6) is limited to clinical research, and (7) leads to therapeutic nihilism in the

absence of evidence from randomized trials (Straus & McAlister, 2000; as cited in Mullen & Streiner, 2004, p. 114).

Certainly each counter-argument merits particular attention and address towards the resolution of concerns and the absolution of conflict regarding EBP. However, this essay will specifically explore the arguments associated with resistance to and issues of changing to the EBP model, namely that the field is not prepared in terms of resources for such an overarching paradigm change. This concern will be addressed as objectively as possible, acknowledging both the preparation and potential benefits of EBP, but also the reality of its limitations. This focus was chosen because of its recurring appearance in preliminary readings of expert reviews of EBP criticisms, but only general and surface level exploration. Ultimately, this review is intended to dissolve misconceptions of the adaptation to EBP, minimize unnecessary resistance to change, and finally, achieve an increased understanding of the pending limitations of applying evidence-based practice to the field of social work and to social interventions; thus the final desired outcome is for researchers, professionals, policy-makers, and students to feel inspired and empowered to work toward the resolution of the issues currently impeding the potential benefits of EBP.

Misconceptions of EBP Resources

As indicated by Straus and McAlister (2000) above, a criticism of EBP is that resources are too limited and that there is not enough “coherent, consistent scientific evidence” (as cited in Mullen & Streiner, 2004, p. 114). While this is a valid concern and consideration, this criticism is in part misconstrued. While EBP is a young field, there is a foundation of valuable research that predates its inception. In fact, Gibbs & Gambrill pointed out that “almost two decades ago, a randomized control trial demonstrated the efficacy of electronic means to locate evidence regarding questions of concern in social work practice” (Gibbs & Johnson, 1983; as cited in Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002, p. 463), meaning that the resources and research access have been in existence for quite some time. And as for the present, resources and provisions are increasingly being made available. Gibbs and Gambrill (2002) identify that “advances in electronic bibliographic databases and in ways to access them have made EBP possible” (p. 461). Furthermore, Chalmers (2003) describes some of these EBP resource advances: “The advent of electronic publishing has transformed the potential for providing the detail required and allows systematic reviews to be updated when additional data become available and improved in other ways when ways of doing this are identified” (p. 12). He also goes on to discuss how both the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration are “exploiting the advantages of electronic media,” by making their resources and systematic reviews publicly available promptly after submission (Chalmers, 2003, p. 14). To all of these advances, Mullen and Streiner (2004) also distinguish that while “EBP is most prominent in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, it is now popular in many Northern European countries, including Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands, where outcome measurement and effectiveness in public services are increasingly seen as important by governments and citizens” (Mullen, in press; Mullen, 2003a, 2003b; as cited in Mullen & Streiner, 2004, p. 112); the field of EBP is developing and growing in terms of resources as well as in contributing bodies. Thus, these reviewers address concerns related to the youth of EBP and its available resources, by demonstrating recent developments and informing practitioners of the wealth of provisions at their disposal.

The response of these reviewers to this concern, however, is far from exhaustive; in fact, it is merely introductory. Many other EBP developments and resources are coming forth. In terms of education and research training, both the University of Oxford and Harvard University have developed EBP graduate research programs in the past few years (Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, 2007; Harvard School of Public Health, Harvard University, 2008). The number one and number four, according to US News & World Report (2008), Masters of Social Work programs, at Washington University in St. Louis and Columbia University respectively, affirm a foundation and leading position in evidence-based research (George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, 2008; School of Social Work, Columbia University, 2008). Additional research groups in Crime and Justice, Education, and Social Welfare have been developed as part of the Campbell Collaboration since its inauguration in 2000 (Chalmers, 2003). Many EBP journals have been founded in recent years (Chalmers, 2003) and even the Journal of Social Work Education has produced a special issue on “Promoting and Sustaining Evidence-based Practice” (JSWE, Fall 2007). There has been a marked increase in research conducted to EBP standards, centres have been formed for the dissemination of research to policymakers and practitioners, online databases have become increasingly easy to access, and reference books have become more available (Mullen & Streiner, 2004). Thus, the counter-argument criticizing the unavailability and underdevelopment of EBP resources is an unfortunate misconception. In terms of the wealth of EBP resources and the growing expanse of its following, some of the antagonism asserted by EBP criticism is misconstrued and unnecessary. Hopefully, the dissemination of this information will minimize unnecessary resistance to the changes proposed by EBP.

Limitations of EBP Resources

However, all of these listings demonstrating the development and growth of EBP resources are not to insinuate that the full adoption of EBP in social work and social interventions is requisite at this time; rather, it is to correct the misconception regarding the unavailability or limited availability of resources and subsequently, minimize unnecessary resistance to change. The further direction of this essay will be to look more specifically at the changes to social work and social interventions required by EBP and explore the validity of the counter-argument concerns. Mullen and Streiner (2004) introduced one of the most difficult obstacles for the adoption of EBP to social work and social intervention when they explained,

EBP ranges in meaning from, on the one hand, some recognition of the need to use research findings to aid in practice decision making to, on the other hand, a paradigm shift (Gambrill, 2003). We take the position that EBP requires a major philosophical and technological change for the field, rather than simply an incremental increase in the use of research in decision making. Accordingly, we consider EBP to encompass both evidence-based practices as well as an *evidence-based process*. (p. 112)

As distinguished by Mullen and Streiner (2004), the adoption of EBP in social work and social interventions is more than gradually referring more and more to research in decision making. Nor is it as simple as using the resources; rather, it involves a “paradigm shift” that requires adapting the entire process. As Gibbs and Gambrill (2002) explain, “It requires changes in how we locate and integrate research into practice” (p. 453). As Gibbs and Gambrill (2002) further outline, EBP involves an entire process where “evidence-based professionals pose specific answerable questions regarding decisions in their practice, search electronically for the answer, critically appraise what they find, carefully consider whether findings apply to a

particular client, and, together with the client, select an option to try and evaluate the results” (p. 453). While this process plausibly offers a multitude of benefits to social work and social interventions by combining practitioner expertise and client preferences with the best evidence, the likelihood of changing such processes on a macro-level seem improbable. In fact, Gibbs and Gambrill (2002) recognize that “encouraging practitioners to be evidence based may clash with expected behaviors in authority-based agencies” and that it may be unfavourable for them to ask questions regarding the effectiveness of their agency’s services (Gambrill, 1999; as cited in Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002, p. 468). Thus, the change to EBP in social work and social services engages whole agencies as well as their practitioners, the logistics and reality of which present a very real concern with EBP. The criticism of EBP that it lacks the resources is partially founded in that there are not systems or tools developed to aid in the transition. The pending paradigm shift frankly requires further research and preparation.

Another relevant counter-argument to EBP likewise needs to be further addressed and researched; it is in reference to both the quality and quantity of available research. As Gibbs and Gambrill (2002) state, “Although many authors include term *evidence based* in their titles, their content does not reflect the process outlined above (e.g., see Corcoran, 2000; Vandiver, 2002). Some authors use the term *evidence based* to refer to research reviews that do not reflect the level of critical appraisal called for in key sources describing evidence-based practices (e.g. Sackett et al., 1997)” (p. 457). Thus, although it has been noted that evidence-based resources are growing in quantity and availability, that does not directly infer that this research meets requisite standards of evidence-based quality. Furthermore, though research access is improving, Mullen and Streiner (2004) inquire “whether there are enough high-quality studies so that evidence-based decisions can be made” (p. 114). Though EBP asserts the significance of research, few studies have explored this possibility. Certainly, the quality and quantity of EBP research should be assessed and evaluated before asserting it as the premium. This considered, Chalmers’ (2003) recommendation to produce more “rigorous, transparent, up-to-date, replicable evaluations of policy and practice” through the conduct of 1) systematic reviews of existing research and 2) additional research, proposes a starting point (p. 1); if followed by practitioners, researchers, agencies, and students, both the quality and quantity of EBP resources can be improved. Until that point of researched and evaluated development, however, the criticism of the quality and quantity of EBP research stands.

Conclusion

Thus, it is hoped that this objective review of the criticisms revolving around resistance to the changes proposed by EBP has dissolved misconceptions and minimized unnecessary resistance to change, but also achieved an increased understanding of the pending limitations of applying EBP to the field of social work and to social interventions. It is certainly difficult to maintain a consistently optimistic outlook when encountering such issues of development and implementation, but As MacIntyre and Petticrew (2000) defined: let us not fall prey to “unjustified defeatism in the face of apparent operational or ethical problems” (p. 803). Clients, agencies, and practitioners alike merit the quality of informed, evaluated, and seasoned practice proposed by EBP. May researchers, professionals, policy-makers, and students feel inspired and empowered to work toward the resolution of the issues currently impeding the potential benefits of EBP.

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