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**DISSERTATION**

**USING EVIDENCE-BASED LITERATURE TO INFORM AND IMPROVE SOCIAL  
WORK PRACTICE**

**Submitted by**

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**Fort Collins, Colorado**

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COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY KATHRYN KIDD ENTITLED USING EVIDENCE-BASED LITERATURE TO INFORM AND IMPROVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.


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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION  
USING EVIDENCE-BASED LITERATURE TO INFORM AND IMPROVE SOCIAL  
WORK PRACTICE

This study examined the use of professional evidence-based literature in informing practice, in knowledge-building, and in skill-building by MSW social workers practicing in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The study was a mixed methods study utilizing two survey phases: questionnaires and interviews.

A brief questionnaire was distributed to 51 MSW social workers. This questionnaire included questions about the social worker's MSW degree, professional memberships, and journal subscriptions. It included the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale (Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999) to determine comfort with specific research-related tasks. Analysis showed greater comfort on the part of participants with searching and reviewing the literature than with tasks more related to conducting research. Additionally, most scale items negatively correlated with years since receiving the MSW degree and correlated positively with the number of research courses taken.

In the second phase, ten social workers were interviewed to obtain an in-depth understanding of their experiences with evidence-based professional literature. Interviewees were asked questions about what informs their decision-making about their practice, how they perceive the value of evidenced-based literature, their use of evidence-based literature, their perceived benefits of and barriers to the use of evidence-based

literature, and what would make evidenced-based literature more useful/accessible to their practice.

Three primary thematic areas were uncovered through the interviews. The value and use of evidence-based literature included a discussion of the concerns with reliance on evidence-based literature to determine best practice. Practitioner resources primarily included time issues and ways of obtaining information. While professional journal articles could be included as a resource, they were a major concern to the social workers interviewed and so were discussed separately.

The issues surrounding practitioner use of professional literature, and especially practitioner needs with regard to their utilization of professional literature, are varied and complex. Numerous avenues for additional research in this area were identified. In addition, recommendations were made to facilitate the provision of greater support for social work practice and social work practitioners. Implications were discussed for social work education, professional social work journals, and social service agencies/organizations. Identifying ways to increase the use of evidence-based literature for social work practitioners is recommended.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Informed practice demands informed use of the professional literature. Both the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education emphasize the importance of evidence-based practice (EBP). Current literature addresses the need for evidence-based practice in social work, seeks to define evidence-based practice and its processes, examines barriers to the use of EBP by social work practitioners, and discusses the way to best teach EBP in social work education. What is lacking is an examination of the actual experiences of social work practitioners, which is the focus of this study.

While in my professional experience I know of large numbers of social workers who do use professional literature, I also know far too many who have read little or nothing since graduation. With decreases in funding often limiting opportunities for conferences and workshops, professional literature becomes for many the best source of continuing education, and thus, of informing practice.

In one experience, I had a colleague who received his MSW just after WW II, and it seems he never learned another thing since. We were discussing sexual assault laws one day, and he took major offense to my use of the term sexual assault, saying that he was using the legal terminology of rape. When I said that the legal term *is* now sexual assault, he gave me a copy of that state's criminal code and asked that I show him where the term was used. I looked in the front of the book, and commented that it was older than I; to which he responded "you mean they've changed!?" This is what I have since

referred to as the “Wilson phenomenon,” an alias named for him. It is, I realize (or at least hope) an extreme example, but it does – sadly – illustrate the point.

As a manager, I would often copy articles for individuals on staff that I thought would be of interest – to the extent that, when I left one organization, the “Jeopardy” slide show answer of “50” was to elicit a correct question of “How many books and journal articles does Kathryn read each month?” Too often, I would have staff tell me that journal articles were not “relevant” to their practice, when what they meant by that is that they are not *specific* to the practice. And yet, no matter the population served, social workers will and do address issues and problems of other populations (i.e., domestic violence, mental health, substance use/abuse, criminal justice problems and issues). Therefore, to be useful to practitioners, professional literature must be relevant and make a contribution to the knowledge base of social work.

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

First, I find it important to delineate both my biases (and the source of those biases) and the suppositions that rise from those biases. A primary bias is that I believe that a significant percentage of social workers do not utilize evidence-based professional literature to inform and improve practice. This bias rises from experience: as stated above, as a long-time manager of social work programs, I have found that very few of my staff and other colleagues routinely (or even ever) utilize the professional literature. A second bias is the belief that the primary reason for the first is an inadequate understanding of evidence-based professional literature, for a myriad of reasons.

From these biases, I have formed several core suppositions. One reason for a lack of understanding of the research literature may be that social workers are not adequately

prepared to understand, interpret, evaluate, and apply evidence-based research. This is likely more true the earlier (i.e., pre-1990's) the social worker received his/her degree, due to changes in program accreditation standards. Another factor may be that research application was taught but that students do not necessarily integrate the information. This lack of integration may be partially due to inadequate support in the field for the use of professional research literature. Finally, those who form the habit early in their careers (i.e., during graduate education, just after entering the profession) of utilizing professional literature are more likely to continue to do so.

There are a number of additional factors that I believe may influence a social work practitioner's use of the professional literature. For example, there may be no "learning community" where they practice, that is, no body of other professionals with whom they may discuss articles. Medical schools frequently have journal clubs, medical specialty groups who review on a regular basis a professional article and then meet to discuss that week's/month's article. Social work agencies and organizations may not do this. A lack of confidence in understanding math and statistics may serve as a barrier for some professionals. While new knowledge may be obtained without a full understanding of any given article's statistical analyses, some professionals may become intimidated by the analysis section and do not believe they are able to assess the article's value or use. Likewise, the development of critical thinking skills may impact a practitioner's comfort with and ability to learn and apply new knowledge from an article. Many articles are very specific with regard to population, setting, and other factors which affect applicability. In addition, articles are often written in academic language and written for

academicians, thus potentially limiting their applicability – or even how understandable they are – to practitioners.

These experiences, biases, and suppositions give rise to the question under exploration here: what is the experience of practicing social workers with regard to the use of evidence-based professional literature? Where do they get this information? Do they obtain this information through systematic inquiry or is it opportunistic (i.e., provided by the employer)? How does evidence-based professional literature inform and improve their practice? What would it take for practicing social workers to use (increase the use of) evidence-based practice literature? What factors enter into this use or lack of use? How confident are social workers in their ability to perform research-related tasks?

Certainly, in agency practice there are multiple factors that drive decisions on interventions, such as popular/current interventions, payer requirements, and time constraints, in addition to research. Also, I recognize that there are other ways and formats within which professionals may continue to inform and improve practice, such as conferences, workshops, in-service trainings, and on-line information searches. However, for the purposes of this study, the use of evidence-based practice literature is the source/resource of interest.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

Blooms' taxonomy, first published in 1956, served to classify and define six major cognitive categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Krathwohl, 2002). This taxonomy provides the theoretical framework for this study and is discussed further in Chapter 2.

## **Approach to Qualitative Inquiry**

The qualitative research tradition that seems to be the best “fit” for this study is that of phenomenology. The questions under study do not pertain to research education in the MSW curriculum, but rather to the use of professional literature by practicing social workers following graduation. I want to explore the “essence” of that phenomenon: the frequency, and the nature and quality of this use. Do practicing social workers read professional literature? How often? How well do they feel they actually understand articles? Can they take new knowledge from an article and apply it to their own practices?

## **Statement of the Problem/Purpose of the Study**

The major purpose of this study is to better understand the use of professional evidence-based literature by practicing MSW social workers: the frequency, certainly, but primarily the nature and quality of this use.

A study of practicing social workers’ utilization of professional literature and their ability to understand and apply professional literature to their own practices has implications for social work education, social work practice, social work organizations/agencies, and for social work researchers. Specific implications are, of course, dependent upon the results of the study. However, the degree to which social workers value the use of professional literature is undocumented. A description of social workers’ behavior regarding the use of professional literature is also unknown. The proposed research may lead to modifications in social work education, organizational practice, and journal publication.

## **Research Questions**

Professional experience and a review of the literature suggest that continuing education to inform and develop practice, especially the use of professional literature in this process, varies greatly among MSW social workers. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to discover the experiences and processes of MSW social workers, practicing in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for development of on-going skills, specifically the use of professional evidence-based literature in informing practice and in knowledge- and skill-building.

What is the nature and quality of the use of professional literature by practicing MSW social workers in development of informed practice?

- 1) How confident are social workers in their ability to perform research-related tasks (research self-efficacy)?
  - a) How is research self-efficacy of practicing social workers related to such factors as: number of years since MSW graduation, number of research courses taken in the MSW study, professional memberships, and number of professional journals to which the social worker subscribes or which s/he regularly accesses?
- 2) What is the experience of practicing social workers with regard to the use of evidence-based professional literature?
  - a) Where do they get this information?
  - b) Do they obtain this information through systematic inquiry or is it opportunistic?

- c) What was the social worker's education experience with regard to evidence-based literature?
  - d) How do MSW social workers describe the way they acquire knowledge that informs, develops, and improves practice?
    - i) Why do they make their choices (factors involved)?
  - e) To what extent do MSW social workers report the incorporation of professional literature in continuing education efforts?
    - i) What types of materials do they use?
    - ii) Do they utilize evidence-based articles?
    - iii) With what frequency?
    - iv) What would it take to increase the frequency?
- 3) How do social work practitioners describe the ways that evidence-based professional literature is used to inform and improve their practice?
- a) Do they appraise findings for quality and applicability?
  - b) Do they apply these findings and considerations in practice?
  - c) Do they evaluate the results of their application of findings to practice?
  - d) To what extent do MSW social workers report that they apply knowledge obtained from evidence-based materials to practice?
    - i) Can they articulate new knowledge/skills obtained through reading a study?
    - ii) Can they identify areas/ways to apply this new knowledge to practice?
- 4) What do social workers think would be ways to increase their use of evidence-based practice literature?

- a) What factors influence social workers' utilization (or lack of utilization) of professional literature?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the stages of evidence-based practice which address the following: searching the professional literature, critical appraisal of the findings for quality and applicability; and the application of these findings and considerations in practice (these may be found in the Council on Social Work Education's evidence-based practice, steps 2-4, discussed in Chapter 2).

The terms literature, professional literature, and social work literature all refer to evidence-based research articles which are published in peer-reviewed professional journals. Evidence-based research articles are those that report results of studies which include an established research methodology, either quantitative or qualitative, and which collect data to answer a specific research question or hypothesis. This excludes any theoretical discussions, general reviews of the literature, experiential descriptions, and editorials, all of which make a valuable contribution to social work knowledge and/or practice, but which may not be evidence-based.

Social work practitioner specifically refers to those with an MSW degree who are currently working as social workers, either in a social services agency or in private social work practice.

The use of professional literature will be generally defined as the reading and the practice application of knowledge and/or skills acquired from evidence-based peer-reviewed journal articles. A list and description of journals most used by social workers

can be found in the following manual: *An Author's Guide to Social Work Journals* (Mendelsohn, 1992).

### **Delimitations**

This study explores the experience of professional MSW social workers in Colorado Springs, Colorado. This site was chosen for two primary reasons. First, as the second-largest city in the state, there is a sizeable and accessible MSW population in Colorado Springs. Second, while there are two programs offering the MSW degree in Colorado Springs, both are relatively new with few graduates as yet. Therefore, schools through which practitioners received the MSW are varied nationally; as opposed to Denver, where University of Denver graduates comprise a large percentage of social workers, or Fort Collins, where many MSW's are graduates of the Colorado State University School of Social Work. These two delimitations restrict the generalizability of the study; however, by using an area with a sizeable MSW population with degrees from a variety of schools, the implications of the study should still be important and wide-reaching.

### **Significance**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the experiences and processes for development of new knowledge and skills – specifically the use of professional evidence-based literature in informing practice, in knowledge-building, and in skill-building – of MSW social workers practicing in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The study was designed to “tell the story” of social workers’ experiences with professional literature, both in education and in practice. Further, it identified the frequency, content, and quality of social workers’ use of professional literature, as well as

supports for and barriers to this use. Study results have implications for social work education, social work practice, social work agencies and organizations, and social work researchers.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the literature begins with a discussion of Bloom's Taxonomy, which provides a theoretical framework. It is followed by an examination of scholarship, how it is defined and perceived and what are its characteristics. Of particular interest is the scholarship of practice or professional scholarship. From there, I look at what constitutes a profession and what are the specific and unique characteristics of professions. I then review professional education, looking specifically at evidence-based practice and professional standards, and the teaching of evidence-based practice. Finally, I examine evidence-based practice, its use in social work, and the literature on social work research self-efficacy.

### **Bloom's Taxonomy**

Bloom's taxonomy, first published in 1956, served to classify and define six major cognitive categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Krathwohl, 2002). Knowledge includes knowledge of specifics (terminology and facts), knowledge of ways and means of dealing with these specifics, and knowledge of the universals and abstractions in a given field. Comprehension includes translation, interpretation, and extrapolation. Application refers to the use of the knowledge in practice. Analysis includes analysis of elements, relationships, and organizational principles. Synthesis describes production of communications, plans, and operations. Finally, evaluation includes evaluation of internal elements and judgments in terms of external elements (Krathwohl, 2002). (Please refer to Appendix A for a detailed outline of the categories and subcategories.)

The taxonomy is often presented much as the food pyramid is, with knowledge forming the largest segment at the base, moving up through the categories to the sixth segment, evaluation, which forms the peak, or top, of the pyramid (OfficePort, 2009). Whether viewed in a graph or as a pyramid, movement through the taxonomy is “from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract” (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 212), and illustrates the development of skills for and the process of critical thinking.

In Bloom’s vision, the taxonomy could serve as more than a measurement tool, also serving as a structure for education by facilitating a:

- common language about learning goals to facilitate communication across persons, subject matter, and grade levels;
- basis for determining for a particular course or curriculum the specific meaning of broad educational goals, such as those found in the currently prevalent national, state, and local standards;
- means for determining the congruence of educational objectives, activities, and assessments in a unit, courses, or curriculum; and
- panorama of the range of educational possibilities against which the limited breadth and depth of any particular education course or curriculum could be contrasted (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 212).

More recently, the taxonomy has been revised (Krathwohl, 2002) from a one-dimensional model to two dimensions. In this, six cognitive process dimensions are utilized: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. These are placed into a table where the dimensions of knowledge, for example, are on the vertical axis, and the cognitive process dimensions are on the horizontal axis. The purpose of this revised

taxonomy is primarily for the analysis of the objectives of a course, but could also be useful for other analyses. As we look, later, at the characteristics of professional education and of evidence-based professional practice, we will see echoes and influences of Bloom's taxonomy.

### Scholarship

What is scholarship? Today, scholarship generally is related to study, to academic pursuits (Boyer, 1990; Random House, 1987). However, as Boyer (1990) tells us, this is a relatively new perception, dating in the United States to the early 1900's. Earlier, scholarship referred to "a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn" (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). According to Shulman (1998, p. 5), scholarly activity should be "*public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one's scholarly community.*" Boyer (1990) identifies four primary functions of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching.

The scholarship of discovery is what, especially in academic circles, is often referred to as research and is probably the most familiar form of scholarship. The scholarship of discovery "contributes not only to the stock of human knowledge but also to the intellectual climate" (Boyer, 1990, p. 17).

Closely linked to the scholarship of discovery is the scholarship of application. This is especially true in the professions. In this function, facts (research results) are placed in perspective, and connections are made. "Serious disciplined, work ... seeks to

interpret, draw together, and bring new insights to bear on original research” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19).

Third in Boyer’s model is the scholarship of integration, which might also be called professional scholarship or the scholarship of practice. In this function, knowledge gained through the earlier two functions (discovery and application) is applied, and the following questions are asked (Boyer, 1990, p.21):

- How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?
- How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions?
- Can social problems *themselves* define an agenda for scholarly investigation?

This function of scholarship is not linear but more interactive, in that not only does discovery lead to application, but application may lead to new understanding and may stimulate new discovery.

Finally, the scholarship of teaching means “not only transmitting knowledge but *transforming* and *extending* it as well” (Boyer, 1990, p.24). However, Boyer (1990, p. 24) also cautions that “without the teaching function, the continuity of knowledge will be broken and the store of human knowledge dangerously diminished.”

### ***Characteristics of Scholarship***

Much of the literature on scholarship comes from education, particularly higher education. It has, however, implications for other disciplines. Boyer’s four universal dimensions of scholarship are specific to higher education (1990, p. 27-28):

- Faculty should establish their credentials as researchers
- All members of the faculty should, throughout their professional careers, stay in touch with developments in their fields and remain professionally alive

- Every faculty member must be held to the highest standards of integrity
- The work of the professorate – regardless of the form it takes – must be carefully assessed.

In defining scholarship, Shulman (1999, p. 160) postulates that the “essential feature of all scholarship is that it is an activity or form of work that cannot be pursued in total isolation.” Scholarship, per Shulman, must be disciplined, must be public, must be subjected to peer review, and must provide a sound basis on which others may build. These criteria, while intended for higher education, have wide ranging applicability.

### ***Scholarship of Practice***

As stated earlier, Boyer’s third function of scholarship serves to integrate the knowledge from discovery and application and serves as the foundation for practice scholarship. It lies at “the intersection of the intellectual, the practical, and the moral” (Shulman, 1999, p. 165). This is the point at which theory-based research is directly utilized, especially by professionals.

### **Professions**

The term practice, as used by professionals, refers to “a disciplined activity that is informed, skillful, and exercised with care for a profession’s purposes and the welfare of those the profession is pledged to serve” (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008, p. xv-xvi). To understand practice, we must first understand professions and the specific, even unique, characteristics of professions.

Professions are called by some “organized occupations” (Freidson, 1986, p. 684), and definitions of profession may be general or they may be specific to the profession itself. The Social Work Dictionary defines a profession as (Barker, 2003, p. 341):

A group of people who use in common a system of *values*, skills, techniques, knowledge, and beliefs to meet a specific social need. The public comes to identify this group as being suited to fulfill the specific need and often gives it formal and legal recognition through *licensing* or other sanctions as the legitimate source for providing the relevant service. The group enhances its public credibility by expanding its body of knowledge, making the knowledge accessible to its members, refining its skills and values, ensuring its members comply with its established standards, and making public the actions it takes to reach these goals.

This definition, specific to the field of social work, illustrates and expands the definition of practice above.

In 1910, in a report to the Carnegie Foundation, Abraham Flexner proposed a model for medical education that was university-based and included educational programs that had a solid scientific base (Boelen, 2002), sparking reforms in medical education that remain today (Boelen, 2002). In 1915, Flexner addressed the National Conference of Charities and Correction on the topic “Is Social Work a Profession?” At the conference, Flexner presented the six key elements in his model of professions, stating that “professions involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility, derive their raw material from science and learning, this material they work up to a practical and definite end, possess an educationally communicable technique, tend to self-organization, and are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation” (as cited in Austin, 1983, p. 363). These criteria, however, are “seldom applicable in fact to

all of the 'recognized' professions ... in particular, law, the clergy, and university faculty" (Austin, 1983, p. 365).

Currently at the core of all professions is a "social contract with the public they serve" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 2). Professions are "guardians of practices vital to society's well-being, in which all citizens have a stake" (Sullivan, Colby, Wegner, Bond, & Shulman, 2007, p. 21), and a "significant mark of professional privilege and social responsibility is the authority that professions wield to require of their members training in specialized institutions and to assess the fitness of candidates for admission to practice" (Sullivan, et al., p. 22). These are often achieved through accreditation and certification and licensure processes (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2008). In the case of social work, the profession is mandated to provide social services (Zastrow, 1995), the purpose of which is to support and enhance social functioning, social care, and social treatment, as well as to develop and test the skills and knowledge for these activities (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi; 2000).

Key elements that are characteristic of professions may be identified as professional autonomy, professional authority, and professional responsibility (Sheafor, Morales, & Scott, in press). Professional autonomy is the flexibility and freedom to provide the specific services to clients, although this may be limited by agency/organizational scope and/or policy and by funding sources. Professional authority refers to having obtained the necessary knowledge and skills for practice in social work. Finally, professional responsibility provides public accountability, through codes of ethics, accreditation, and licensure. This,

then constitutes Sullivan's (2005) "social contract:" the profession is the acknowledged authority and as such ensures that practitioners obtain and demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills and follow the mandates (i.e., values and ethics) of the profession itself.

According to Shulman (2004), all professions are characterized by six attributes:

- the obligations of *service* to others, as in a "calling;"
- *understanding* of a scholarly or theoretical kind;
- a domain of skilled performance or *practice*;
- the exercise of *judgment* under conditions of unavoidable uncertainty;
- the need for *learning from experience* as theory and practice interact; and
- a professional *community* to monitor quality and aggregate knowledge (p. 530).

These six attributes may be seen as a basis for professional education and the challenges it faces. It is interesting to note that no reference is made to science or research to inform professional behavior.

### **Evidence-based Practice and Professional Standards**

The National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008) provides social work professionals with a set of core values and ethical principles as well as ethical standards for social work practice. Of particular importance when examining evidence-based practice is the ethical principle regarding the value competence:

Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

Social Workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession (NASW, 2008).

The standards for “Ethical Responsibilities to Clients” and “Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals,” in particular, address this in even greater detail, section 4.01 stating:

(b) Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social Workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.

(c) Social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically based knowledge, relevant to social work and social work ethics (NASW, 2008).

This ethical code and its standards support evidence-based practice.

While the idea of evidence-based practice is not new, it has seen a relatively recent resurgence in the social work literature, as evidenced by the dedication in Fall 2007 of the *Journal of Social Work Education* to this topic. Many of the initial, and even subsequent, social work models for evidence-based practice are based upon the medical

model for evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice has been defined as “the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. The practice of evidence based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research” (Sackett, Rosenberg, Muir Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996, p. 71). This medical definition is, in fact, used by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as the definition of evidence-based practice, or EBP (CSWE, 2008).

### **Definitions of Evidence-based Practice**

Much of the literature utilizes Sackett *et al*'s (1996) definition or some form thereof, thus defining evidence-based practice as integrating empirically-validated treatments and clinical expertise, combined with elements of critical thinking and client needs (Gambrill, 2007; McNeill, 2006). A major component of the discussion of evidence-based practice is the development of models, or frameworks, for engaging in this practice. The Council on Social Work Education (2008) lists five steps for evidence-based practice:

1. Formulating a client, community, or policy-related question;
2. Systematically searching the literature;
3. Appraising findings for quality and applicability;
4. Applying these findings and considerations in practice;
5. Evaluating the results.

Others may have five (Gambrill, 2004; Gossettt & Weinman, 2007), six (Gibbs, 2007), seven (Siegel, 1984), or even eight (Thyer, 2004) steps, but all involve a problem-solving

process that includes a definition of the problem and critical review and appraisal of evidence-based literature.

### **Objections to Evidence-based Practice**

There is opposition to the necessity of using evidence-based practice and a number of objections have been raised. Chief among these are that evidence-based practice limits professional autonomy (a reluctance to cede presumed expertise and traditional authorities) and that EBP relies on a version of science that depends on randomized experiments (Reynolds, 2000; Rzepnicki & Briggs, 2004). Others would argue that evidence-based practice is not new but rather is what good practitioners do and have always done (Geddes, 2000). Still others cite various barriers faced by social work practitioners who might wish to engage in evidence-based practice. These obstacles include such logistical restrictions as a lack of access to professional literature, funding limitations for journals, and time constraints (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, & Howard, 2006; Rzepnicki & Briggs, 2004).

### **Professional Education**

Professional education is distinguished from general education in that it provides the knowledge and skills necessary and specific to the field of endeavor (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008). The aim of professional education is to “initiate novice practitioners to think, to perform, and to conduct themselves (that is, to act morally and ethically) like professionals” (Sullivan, Colby, Wegner, Bond, & Shulman, 2007, p. 22). The goal of teaching knowledge, skills, and attitude and involves six tasks:

1. Developing in students the fundamental knowledge and skill, especially an academic knowledge base and research

2. Providing students with the capacity to engage in complex practice
3. Enabling students to learn to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty
4. Teaching students how to learn from experience
5. Introducing students to the disciplines of creating and participating in a responsible and effective professional community
6. Forming students able and willing to join an enterprise of public service (Sullivan et al., 2007, p. 22).

Like Shulman (2004), there is also limited reference to science or research to inform professional behavior – only as it is a part of fundamental knowledge and skills.

### ***Teaching Evidence-based Practice***

Additional issues are raised with regard to the teaching of evidence-based practice. Much of the research examines the research curriculum (and integration of EBP into research courses) and/or the integration of research into other areas of social work education, such as the field experience (El Ansari, 2004; Olsen, 1990; Smith, Cohen-Callow, Harnek Hall, & Hayward, 2007). Others argue that evidence-based practice should be taught as part of practice courses (Blythe, 1992) or even throughout the curriculum (Drake, Hovmand, Jonson-Reid, & Zayas, 2007). Clearly, it is important to reduce the disconnect (both perceived and curriculum-based) between research and practice. Identified challenges to the success of integrating evidence-based practice in the social work curriculum include differing definitions of EBP by social work educators,

the feasibility of students to implement EBP after graduation, and preventing the softening of standards for EBP (Rubin & Parrish, 2007).

The Council on Social Work Education's (2008) Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) also address evidence-based practice and incorporate the use of evidence-based research to inform practice and evidence-based evaluation of the social worker's own practice/program. Educational Policy 2.1.6, "Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research," reads:

Social workers use practice experience to inform research, employ evidence-based interventions, evaluate their own practice, and use research findings to improve practice, policy, and social service delivers. Social workers comprehend quantitative and qualitative research and understand scientific and ethical approaches to building knowledge. Social workers

- use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry and
- use research evidence to inform practice.

These latter two specific elements provide the primary practice behaviors for meeting the standard. The second would incorporate the first three steps in the CWSE framework (five steps for evidence-based practice, see "Definitions of Evidence-based Practice" section); the first incorporates steps 4 and 5, thus giving us:

- use research evidence to inform practice
  1. formulate a client, community, or policy-related question
  2. systematically search the literature
  3. appraise findings for quality and applicability

- use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry
- 4. apply these findings and considerations in practice
- 5. evaluate the results

Step 4, in actuality, segues between the two major practice behaviors.

### **History of Using Evidence in Practice**

Social work as a profession – and professional social work education – evolved from two distinct, conflicting, and yet concurrent movements, the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement. Charity Organization Societies worked to provide direct services to “deserving” individuals and utilized “friendly visitors” to work with those in need. Settlement Houses, on the other hand, were located in impoverished neighborhoods and focused on improving conditions in those neighborhoods (Zastrow, 1995; Leighninger, 2008). Thus, the profession was, in its inception, much influenced by philosophies and theoretical positions, rather than more scientific approaches.

Interestingly, it was when the Charity Organization Society was most popular that a “scientific charity” approach emerged. Careful record keeping was required of friendly visitors, planned interventions and treatments were expected, and professional journals were published. For example, the journal *Charities Review* (later absorbed by *Charities*) emerged in 1891. The journal, intended for social workers who served people living in poverty, reflected the basic assumptions of what was referred to as scientific charity and promoted the theory of “Social Darwinism.” Social Darwinism reflected the belief that the principles of natural selection should be applied to human societies and was used to support the idea that poverty was a result of personal flaws (Finnegan, 2009). The

influence of Flexner's speech and writings and the emergence of the theory of evolution gave rise to a more "scientific" approach to poverty than simple philanthropy.

In 1973, Joel Fischer asked the question, "Is casework effective?" Fischer postulated that the "core of professional practice is a commitment to competence – a commitment that most directly refers to a concern with the effective carrying out of professional services" (p. 5). At that time, Fischer reviewed studies of the success of casework interventions, presenting "findings related to practice, rather than an analysis of practice per se" (p. 19), likely one of the – if not the – earliest reviews of research on a field of social work practice.

The middle-to-late 1970s in particular saw the emergence of a more scientific revolution within the social work profession, where the profession "gradually moved away from vague and haphazard formulations and toward scientifically or empirically based practice" (Fischer, 1981, p. 199). Social work research up to that period was marked by its inability to provide clear evidence of practice effectiveness (Fischer, 1981). Additionally, prior to that time, "the main bases for selecting approaches to practice, both in social work education and in actual practice, seemed to be faith, comfort with what already was known, the charisma of certain theoreticians or respected practitioners, or consensus among 'experts' or peers" (Fischer, 1981, p. 200). Gordon (1983) urged that the "profession be based on knowledge, not wishful thinking, and that this knowledge be tested empirically" (p. 184). And so, the profession over time began to increase its focus on empirically-based knowledge, the merging of theory and research to inform practice.

## **Research Self-Efficacy**

Research self-efficacy refers to an individual's comfort in his/her ability with regard to specific research tasks or activities. This confidence does not necessarily translate to actual ability, but certainly can be considered one key to an individual's likelihood to understand and utilize research, through practice evaluation or through – as is the interest of this study – utilization of evidence-based literature to inform and improve practice.

Holden *et al* viewed “social work self-efficacy as an individual's confidence in their ability to carry out a wide variety of professional tasks, with research being a small subset of those tasks” (Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999, p. 465). Since research was viewed as “a subcomponent of social work,” research self-efficacy, therefore, was “a subcomponent of social work self-efficacy” (Holden et al., 1999, p. 465). They then developed a nine-item scale designed to measure a social worker's confidence with regard to research tasks. Tasks measured by the scale included:

1. Confidence in searching electronic databases of the scholarly literature;
2. Confidence in using technological advances such as the Internet in research;
3. Confidence in reviewing a particular area of social science theory and research and in writing a balanced and comprehensive literature review;
4. Confidence in formulating a clear research question or hypothesis;
5. Confidence in choosing a research design;
6. Confidence in designing and implementing a sampling strategy;
7. Confidence in designing and implementing a measurement approach;
8. Confidence in designing and implementing a data analysis strategy; and

9. Confidence in effectively presenting study results and implications (Holden, et al., 1999).

The Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale was developed as an assessment tool which could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of social work research education. Unrau and Beck (2004, p. 188) noted that research “has been the silent curriculum partner in preparing” social work and speech-language pathology practitioners. They found that when research courses were taken in conjunction with practice courses, and when students “were given opportunities to apply research learning outside of class” (Unrau & Beck, 2004, p. 187), student’s research self-efficacy was higher.

While studies primarily focus on students (Holden et al., 1999; Unrau & Beck, 2004; Love, Bahner, Jones, & Nilsson, 2007), it would seem likely that a student’s research self-efficacy would transfer to practice and would influence a social worker’s ability “to use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry and use research evidence to inform practice” (CSWE, 2008, EPAS 2.1.6). If, as Holden *et al* maintain, research self-efficacy is a component of social work self-efficacy, it is reasonable to hypothesize that those who are most comfortable with research tasks are also most comfortable with utilizing evidence-based professional literature to inform and improve practice.

### **Standards for Best Practices**

One direct result of the emphasis over the past few decades on evidence-based practice knowledge is the emergence of standards and/or models for effective practice. The following are two examples of best practice standards. The ways evidence-based knowledge is being used to improve social work practice and current professional resources available for social workers are also examined.

Blueprints for Violence Prevention, a project of the University of Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, seeks to “identify truly outstanding violence and drug prevention programs that meet a high standard of effectiveness.” The program has identified eleven model programs and seventeen promising programs, based upon the following criteria: evidence of deterrent effect with a strong research design, sustained effects, multiple site replication, analysis of mediating factors, and cost effectiveness.

The *Social Work Best Practice Healthcare Case Management Standards (2009)* distinguishes social work case management from other professions’ practice of case management as addressing “both the individual client’s biopsychosocial status as well as the state of the social system in which Case Management is both micro and macro in nature: intervention occurs at both the client (patient and family) and system levels.” The Standards provide criteria with regard to education and training, social work/scope of services, and quality of care indications (for screening, assessment, intervention methods/options, and documentation).

### **Using Evidence-based Practice to Improve Social Work Practice**

Much of the literature focuses on what constitutes evidence-based practice (EBP). But what of the use of EBP to improve social work practice? Social work practice may occur in a number of fields of practice, such as child welfare/protective services, corrections, mental health, school social work, community organization, case management, and health care. Often, discussion of the implementation of evidence-based practice is specific to a particular field of practice. A major component of the discussion of evidence-based practice is the development of models, or frameworks, for engaging in

this practice. As discussed earlier, the Council on Social Work Education (2008) lists five steps for evidence-based practice.

Reviews of the literature may be extensive and provide directions for evidence-based practice within the specific field of practice (Golder, Ivanoff, Cloud, Besel, McKiernan, Bratt, & Bledsoe, 2005; Nathan & Gorman, 2007). Others may be brief and/or very specific within the field of practice, as is Frey and George-Nichols' (2003) review of school social work practice with children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Studies of the effectiveness of specific interventions can be found in nearly all fields of practice. To illustrate, let us take a closer look at two studies in the area of child welfare.

Looking at child welfare, Ferguson (2001) uses a case study of a child protective intervention to illustrate best practice. He argues that it is important to go beyond a "deficit approach" (p. 9) to evaluate child protective services and examine effective child-centered child and family interventions. At no point in his case study does he indicate that any workers involved utilized evidence-based literature to inform their practice. Dawson and Berry (2002), on the other hand, review the empirical literature in an effort to identify best practice in child welfare services. They define an effective intervention as one which "helps to create changes in lifestyle, not just behavior; includes practical and relevant interventions; and strives for long-term changes" (p. 297). Their review of the literature examines immediate and home-based interventions, broadly focused case management, family focused interventions, caseworker characteristics, and special child neglect issues. Through this examination, they conclude that there are "several promising practices in child welfare," identifying specific caseworker and

agency behaviors as the most important factors in successfully promoting family reunification.

One field of practice which has more extensively addressed evidence-based practice is that of mental health. While the mental health literature does include reviews of the literature and examinations of specific interventions, it also includes guidelines for programs to address evidence-based practice (Hardiman, Theriot, & Hodges, 2005) and evidence to support ways to measure practice skills of practitioners (O'Hare & Sherrer, 2006). In one of the most extensive works, Nathan and Gorman (2007) set criteria for the evaluation of empirical research (ranking studies as type one through type six), then examine the empirical research on treatments for each of twenty-five groups of diagnoses. Treatments include pharmaceutical as well as therapeutic. This then serves as a guide for practitioners in determining what the best practices are for a client with a given diagnosis. Further, Gioia (2007) also seeks to understand practitioner adoption of evidence-based practice and proposes a process for ensuring continued involvement of practitioners in evidence-based practice. However, she does not actually examine practitioners or practitioner use of evidence-based practice.

One program has implemented an innovative and extensive process for evidence-based practice and merits a closer look here. In Illinois, the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois School of Social Work (Center) and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) joined forces to “develop a functional, dynamic child welfare research agenda for the state of Illinois” (Johnson, Wells, Testa, & McDonald, 2003, p. 54). This project had three phases: planning (identification of stakeholders, development of protocols and methods), consensus-

building (information-gathering, prioritizing, producing a written agenda, stakeholder review, adoption and dissemination of the research agenda), and implementation (institutionalization of the research agenda, application of findings to practice, monitoring). Participants in the initial stages (planning and consensus-building) identified 34 research priorities related to:

- service delivery and outcomes in child protective services (8),
- family maintenance services (3),
- substitute care (10),
- family reunification (3),
- adoption and guardianship (8), and
- substance-exposed infants (2).

The need for outcomes information about work with children and families was identified. As a result, more than forty projects were initiated by the Center in the first year. The Practice Advancement Committee (PAC) was established by DCFS to translate the research findings into DCFS policy and training. The PAC is responsible for the prioritization of research topics, the research agenda (and updates or changes to same), ensuring that DCFS policies and procedures are consistent with best research evidence, and training. The training is in the form of educational forums for the child welfare community; these forums disseminate and interpret research findings in the specific intervention areas and are practitioner-oriented.

Another specific project, What Works for Children (WWfC), also merits closer consideration. This British project “developed a research information service to provide research evidence in response to practitioners’ queries, in ... an easily digestible form”

(Stevens, Liabo, Frost, & Roberts, 2005, p. 67). This project resulted from the recognition that practitioners often do not utilize empirical research. Practitioners contact the service with questions about practice. The service's researchers then search, appraise, and summarize the relevant literature and return this information to the querying practitioner, thus providing practitioners with a comprehensive and understandable body of knowledge on which to base practice decisions.

### **Professional Resources**

The National Association of Social Workers' website (2009) provides a number of resources for professional social workers. Included in this are sections devoted to evidence-based practice and research (the sections are cross-referenced). The section on evidence-based practice lists a number of issues identified by a National Institute of Mental Health symposium that are related to evidence-based mental health practice. The research web page includes a section on "keeping up with research." Web-based resources such as this can be invaluable for those practitioners who are "on their own," who are not employed in a field of practice where blueprints and practice standards are readily available, and who must work themselves to identify best practices using evidence-based literature.

Another source providing resources for social workers is the Campbell Collaboration. Of special interest at this free website is the social welfare section, which "produces, maintains, and disseminates systematic reviews in the fields of social care" (Campbell Collaboration, 2009). These systematic reviews provide a review and examination of professional literature on a specific identified topic, determining what

helps, what harms, and what evidence supports the conclusions (Campbell Collaboration, 2009).

### **Summary**

In sum, the literature addresses the need for evidence-based practice in social work, seeks to define evidence-based practice and its processes, examines barriers to the use of EBP by social work practitioners, and discusses teaching EBP in social work education. There is a disconnect, however, between the current body of research on evidence-based practice and an understanding of where, when, why, and how practitioners actually use evidence-based literature. What is lacking is an examination of the actual experiences of social work practitioners, which is the focus of this study. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) How confident are social workers in their ability to perform research-related tasks (research self-efficacy)?
  - a) How is research self-efficacy of practicing social workers related to such factors as: number of years since MSW graduation, number of research courses taken in the MSW study, professional memberships, and number of professional journals to which the social worker subscribes or which s/he regularly accesses?
- 2) What is the experience of practicing social workers with regard to the use of evidence-based professional literature?
  - a) Where do they get this information?
  - b) Do they obtain this information through systematic inquiry or is it opportunistic?
  - c) What was the social worker's education experience with regard to evidence-based literature?

- d) How do MSW social workers describe the way they acquire knowledge that informs, develops, and improves practice?
  - i) Why do they make their choices (factors involved)?
- e) To what extent do MSW social workers report the incorporation of professional literature in continuing education efforts?
  - i) What types of materials do they use?
  - ii) Do they utilize evidence-based articles?
  - iii) With what frequency?
  - iv) What would it take to increase the frequency?
- 3) How do social work practitioners describe the ways that evidence-based professional literature is used to inform and improve their practice?
  - a) Do they appraise findings for quality and applicability?
  - b) Do they apply these findings and considerations in practice?
  - c) Do they evaluate the results of their application of findings to practice?
  - d) To what extent do MSW social workers report that they apply knowledge obtained from evidence-based materials to practice?
    - i) Can they articulate new knowledge/skills obtained through reading a study?
    - ii) Can they identify areas/ways to apply this new knowledge to practice?
- 4) What do social workers think would be ways to increase their use of evidence-based practice literature?
  - a) What factors influence social workers' utilization (or lack of utilization) of professional literature?

1. How confident are social workers in their ability to perform research-related tasks (research self-efficacy)?
  - a. How is research self-efficacy of practicing social workers related to such factors as: number of years since MSW graduation, number of research courses taken in the MSW study, professional memberships, and number of professional journals to which the social worker subscribes or which s/he regularly accesses?
2. What is the experience of practicing social workers with regard to the use of evidence-based professional literature?
  - a. Where do they get this information?
  - b. Do they obtain this information through systematic inquiry or is it opportunistic?
  - c. What was the social worker's education experience with regard to evidence-based literature?
  - d. In what other learning processes do MSW social workers engage to inform, develop, and improve practice?
    - i. Why do they make their choices (factors involved)?
  - e. To what extent do MSW social workers incorporate professional literature in continuing education efforts?
    - i. What types of materials do they use?
    - ii. Do they utilize evidence-based articles?
    - iii. With what frequency?
    - iv. What would it take to increase the frequency?

3. How does evidence-based professional literature inform and improve social workers' practice?
  - a. Do they appraise findings for quality and applicability?
  - b. Do they apply these findings and considerations in practice?
  - c. Do they evaluate the results of their application of findings to practice?
  - d. To what extent do MSW social workers apply knowledge obtained from evidence-based materials to practice?
    - i. Can they articulate new knowledge/skills obtained through reading a study?
    - ii. Can they identify areas/ways to apply this new knowledge to practice?
4. What would it take for practicing social workers to use (increase the use of) evidence-based practice literature?
  - a. What factors influence social workers' utilization (or lack of utilization) of professional literature?

The study sought to “tell the story” of social workers’ experiences with professional literature, both in education and in practice. Further, it looked to identify the frequency, content, and quality of social workers’ use of professional literature, as well as supports for and barriers to this use. Study results were thought to have implications for social work education, social work practice, social work agencies and organizations, and social work researchers.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHOD**

This study utilizes two survey phases: questionnaires and interviews. Both the questionnaires and the interviews were piloted to assess reliability of the format and questions. Participation in the study was voluntary and completely confidential.

### **Research Design**

This is a mixed methods study. The first phase, the questionnaire, is quantitative in nature. A series of professional and educational demographic questions and a research self-efficacy scale were completed by each participant, and the results were analyzed. Participants were provided the questionnaires at agency/organizational staff meetings and were asked to complete and immediately return the questionnaire.

The second phase of the study, the interviews, required qualitative analysis. The qualitative research tradition that seems to be the best “fit” for this study is that of phenomenology. Admittedly, the case could be made for this as an ethnography, but I do not believe that the research educational experience and use (or lack of use) of professional literature really constitutes a culture. Phenomenology, however, goes to an experience. Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as one which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). All social work students (BSW and MSW – although this study was limited to MSW social workers) have one or more courses in research. The goal of the research course(s) is two-fold: to prepare the student to conduct research on his/her own practice (and program) and to prepare the student to utilize the professional literature to inform his/her practice (CSWE).

Phenomenology utilizes primarily interviews with individuals. The interview questions were structured to elicit the social worker's actual use of professional literature, extent and nature of the use, and any possible barriers to that use.

### **Participants and Site**

Participants were practicing MSW social workers, those who have completed all requirements for and received the MSW/MSSW degree and are currently employed or in private practice. All participants in the study (both phases) were provided a cover letter providing brief information about the study, describing the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of all responses, and providing contact information should participants have any subsequent questions. Participants in the interview phase also signed a statement agreeing to participate and to have the interview audio-taped. (Please refer to Appendices B and C for copies of the letters.)

Questionnaires were administered by the researcher at social service agencies in Colorado Springs during staff meetings. Eight social service agencies, each with three or more MSW social workers, were contacted by the researcher with a request to attend a routine staff meeting for the purpose of administering the brief questionnaire. The researcher attended the scheduled meetings at seven of those agencies who agreed to participate (one agency scheduled a date, but never scheduled a time or place). In smaller agencies with only one or two social workers, the researcher met with individuals interested in participating on a case-by-case basis as was convenient for the participant, for completion of the questionnaire. This was also the case with those participants who are in private practice. Fourteen individual meetings were scheduled.

As a member of the social work community in Colorado Springs, the researcher is well known to social services agencies and practicing social workers. This relationship helped to provide entry to agencies and social workers to request participation. However, in no way was it used to influence social workers to participate, nor are there any consequences to participation or non-participation.

### **Data Collection and Measures**

The questionnaire consisted of two multi-part questions aimed at determining the extent and frequency of professional social workers' use of professional literature. It included questions about each social worker's degree (year and school) and research courses in the MSW. Gender was not requested, as social worker practitioners seem to be predominantly female. As the number of years since the MSW degree was obtained was the primary concern, age was not collected. (Please refer to Appendix D for the questionnaire questions.)

The Brief Research Self-efficacy Scale (Holden et al., 1999) was included in the questionnaire (Appendix D). This scale has nine items on which respondents are asked to rate themselves from 0 to 100, where 0 equals cannot do at all, 50 equals moderately certain can do, and 100 equals certain can do. In testing the scale, Holden *et al* reported an internal consistency Cronbach's alpha of .94 between the pre-test and post-test. Using the Wilcoxin signed ranks test, "the differences between pre- and post-test scores were statistically significant ( $\alpha=.005$ ) for all individual items and the total scale score" (Holden et al., 1999, p. 471). There appear to be no published norms for either social work students or social work practitioners.

Each participant was asked if s/he would be interested in participating in the interview portion of the study. Questionnaire responses were confidential for those who enroll as possible interview participants and were anonymous if the participant choose not to participate in the interview phase. For those who expressed interest in and a willingness to participate in the interview process, a space for contact information was provided. The researcher selected interview participants who can be characterized with a range of years of practice and a variety of fields of practice. No identifying information was kept in the database, and the section containing contact information on interview volunteers was cut and destroyed once all analyses were completed.

A pilot of the questionnaire was conducted with Colorado State University social work doctoral students, all of whom were also social work practitioners. The time involved was recorded, so that agencies could be given an accurate estimate of the time involved in participation. Actual completion of the questionnaire required five to fifteen minutes. In addition, pilot participants had the opportunity to engage in a feedback session at which clarity and completeness of the questions were discussed. The question which the pilot participants found unclear was the request to identify the field of practice; pilot participants felt that a list of fields of practice should be provided. It was the decision of the researcher not to include a multiple choice list, primarily since the researcher would be present and could answer any questions that arose regarding this and also so as to keep the length of the questionnaire brief. (Of the 51 study participants, only one had a question about the field of practice.)

Subsequent to the completion of all questionnaires, participants for the interview phase were selected from those who indicated an interest in participating in the second

phase. As much as possible, participants were selected to include a range of years of practice (defined as number of years since the MSW degree) and a variety of fields of practice (i.e., mental health, health care, protective services, welfare, private practice).

Ten participants completed interviews. The actual number of participants was based upon redundancy (or saturation). Each interview was analyzed for variables presented; at the point that interviews no longer generated new variables related to the thematic structure, the process was considered redundant, or saturated. This redundancy point was achieved at the sixth interview. However, four additional interviews were conducted to provide input from a wider variety of fields of practice.

Participants in the second phase were scheduled for private interviews at a time and place that was convenient for each participant. Interview questions were open-ended and broad, and the interviews were conversational in structure. The interviews ranged in time from thirty minutes to two hours, with most taking approximately one hour. All interviews were held in one session. All interviews, with the consent of the participants, were audio-taped. No identifying information on the participants was kept or reported.

The focus of the interviews was on the interviewee and his/her professional experience. The goal was to discover what informs social workers' practice and why they utilize the resources they do. Additional information was gathered about their use of professional evidence-based literature, what they find helpful or not, and why. Questions in the interview sought to determine the type and extent of continuing education efforts on the part of the social worker. Discussion focused on the participant's experiences as a practicing social worker with regard to evidence-based practice, including the participant's training with regard to the use of professional literature.

Interviewees were allowed to reply to a question in as much depth as they wished. With one exception, all those interviewed discussed the information sought from all the questions after asking the first question. At the close of the initial discussion, all subsequent questions were asked to see if there was any additional information the participant wished to add.

Interviews were analyzed utilizing constant comparative analysis. Extensive notes were taken at the time of the interviews, along with the audio-taping. Subsequent to the interviews, the audio-tapes of the interviews were reviewed and notes were again taken. After each review of the audio-tapes, the notes were analyzed for key words or phrases. These key words and phrases were highlighted and color-coded. Key words and phrases identified in each interview were cross-referenced with those in the other interviews. The identified key words and phrases were then analyzed to identify major themes. In total, audio-tapes were reviewed and notes taken an average of five times (one short interview was reviewed just three times; longer interviews were reviewed up to eight times).

The interview protocol was also piloted. Two social work practitioners in different fields of practice and with different years of experience (who were not in Colorado Springs and so were not possible participants) were interviewed. This provided feedback as to the specific questions of the interview and also as to the general time necessary for completion of the interviews. Both of the pilot participants were provided the opportunity to give feedback on the interview structure and questions. In both cases, they found the questions to be clear and the progression to be logical. The only suggestion was that even those who use evidence-based literature should be given the

opportunity to discuss possible roadblocks. This was incorporated into the interview structure. (Please refer to Appendix E for interview questions.)

As only one researcher administered all questionnaires and interviews, the likelihood of consistency was increased. One threat to validity is that of unconscious researcher bias, especially with the conversational nature of the interviews. However, I was able to limit my participation to the interview questions and an occasional request for clarification (although I did, after the interview, provide resources to those who had indicated an interest in additional professional resources). The interviewees were all thoughtful and thorough in their responses, frequently moving naturally from one question to another in their discussion without any queries or prompting. In addition, primary themes in the interviews were immediately clear and consistent (nearly universal), with nearly all participants providing examples to illustrate their points.

### **Data Analysis and Form of Results**

Data analysis for the questionnaire is primarily in the form of descriptive statistics. Frequencies and means for each possible response to each item on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale were calculated. In addition, each item and the individual mean scores were correlated with the number of years since the MSW degree and with the number of research courses taken during the MSW study. Finally, independent *t* tests were run, comparing membership in a professional organization (yes or no) on each scale item and comparing subscription to professional journals (yes or no) on each scale item.

Primary analyses were centered on the interviews and followed general phenomenological research data analysis steps. First, interview audio-tapes were repeatedly reviewed and significant statements recorded. Next these significant

statements were used to develop “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007), which then gave rise to various themes. The various themes were used to write both textural (what they experience with regard to the reading of articles and the use of professional literature) and structural (context or setting – such as MSW education, professional supervision, and/or agency supports – that influence what they experience) descriptions of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007), using examples from the different interviews to illustrate. These themes were clustered, to capture main categories, using a thematic conceptual matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Willig, 2001). Finally, the cases were integrated to present a composite description of the phenomenon under study (Willig, 2001): the frequency, nature, and quality of social work practitioners’ use of professional literature.

The number of participants was such that manual analysis of the data was feasible and no computer program was utilized in analyses of the interviews.

### **Limitations**

The study is limited primarily by the number of responses. One agency did not have a structure or forum for surveying the social work staff, and although the agency did initially schedule a date for presentation to social work staff, they never scheduled a place or time. Of greater impact was the fact that many agencies in Colorado Springs employ few social workers, having instead a higher number of Licensed Professional Counselors. The interview phase was somewhat limited by those who “dropped out,” individuals who initially agreed but never actually were available for an interview. Another limiting factor may be the experience(s) of those who agree to participate in the interview process. It had been hoped that it would be possible to obtain a range of participants based on

degree of utilization of professional literature; however, the pool of respondents was fairly homogeneous on this factor.

As with any study utilizing interviews of human subjects, the truthfulness and reliability of memory of the subjects must be considered. In this case, this would most likely manifest itself in the degree of disclosure. It was expected that the wording of the questions to avoid a “test-like” feel did encourage full disclosure. Questions were worded to solicit opinions, feedback, and reflection rather than “correctness” or scores.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study has two survey phases: questionnaires, followed by interviews. Both the questionnaires and the interviews were piloted to assess reliability of the format and questions. Participation in the study was voluntary and completely confidential. Data collection spanned the period from February 2009 through May 2009.

### Questionnaires

#### *Sample and Participants*

Questionnaires were distributed and collected at social services agencies in Colorado Springs, Colorado. A total of 51 participants completed questionnaires. Fields of practice were described by social work practitioners as work with: aging, anxiety and trauma, child protection, developmental disabilities, domestic violence, juvenile corrections, medical (hospital, hospice, and home health), mental health, military social work, mind-body-spirit, private practice, school social work, and young adult/adolescent services. The largest groups represented were medical social work (15), mental health (10), and school social work (10).

One reason for selecting Colorado Springs as a data collection site was the expectation that participants would have received their MSW from a variety of graduate programs. The goal was to not evaluate any one or a couple of programs, but to learn more about the experiences of practicing MSW social workers. It was, therefore, deemed important that the programs where participants received their degrees be varied, and this proved to be the case. While Colorado State University (17) and the University of Denver (10) were the two most represented programs, a total of nineteen programs were

represented. The additional programs were: Arizona State University, Columbia University, Loyola University, Michigan State University, New Mexico Highlands University, Ohio State University, University of Alaska, University of Connecticut, University of Hawaii, University of Illinois, University of Maryland, University of Nebraska, University of Texas – Arlington, University of South Carolina, University of Wisconsin – Madison, and West Virginia University, with one or a few each.

Interestingly, even with other western region schools represented, the third most represented program was the University of Wisconsin – Madison, with four. The year in which the MSW degree was received ranged from 1967 (42 years since graduation) to 2008 (less than one year since graduation), with a mean of 12 and a median of 7 years post-graduation.

### ***Questionnaire Responses***

Respondents on the questionnaire were asked about MSW research coursework. The number of research courses reported ranged from zero (one respondent) to five (one respondent), with one respondent leaving the question blank. Most respondents indicated having had two research courses (21); ten reported one course, nine reported three courses, and eight reported four courses. The majority (45) reported having applied their research knowledge during their MSW programs. This was also true of conducting research in the MSW program, where 45 of 51 (88%) reported having done so. However, the responses to these questions must be considered questionable, as a number of participants commented following the conclusion and collection of the questionnaires that they could not really remember the nature of the research course work in their master's studies, and a few were unsure of the exact number of research courses taken.

The other major area of inquiry on the questionnaires was regarding professional memberships and professional journal subscriptions. Over half (33) of the participants indicated no professional memberships. Of the remaining 18, one-third (six) reported that there was no journal associated with the professional membership. Thus, only twelve participants have membership in a professional organization that is accompanied by a professional journal subscription.

Twelve of the 51 participants indicated that they subscribe to and/or access other journals and sources of information (beyond professional memberships): six of these were in addition to professional memberships, six were individuals who have no membership in a professional organization. While a number of these are professional journals, it must be noted that several were also reportorial publications or on-line information sources rather than peer-reviewed journals.

### ***Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale***

Responses on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale were widely dispersed. Table 1 indicates the number of respondents for each level of confidence, for each item on the scale. Four respondents selected 100% for all nine items. Mean scale scores for participants ranged from 11.11 to 100.0. The sample mean scores for each item on the scale ranged from 51.76 to 80.78 and can be found in Table 1.

Overall, respondents were more confident in their abilities with the first four items in the scale; responses below 40% on items one through four were minimal. Lower confidence levels were more frequently indicated with regard to selecting a research design, implementing a sampling strategy, implementing a measurement approach, and implementing a data analysis strategy, with the modes for these items also being

generally lower than for other items; but even these items averaged 50% or more. This would indicate that respondents are more comfortable with searching and reviewing the literature than with tasks more related to conducting research.

**Table 1**

***Responses to the Brief Research Self-Efficacy (number listed under each confidence percentile level is the number of respondents who replied with that confidence level) and Mean Response for Each Item***

Confidence that can:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	Mean
A. Search the scholarly literature	0	0	1	1	3	7	5	5	7	8	14	75.49
B. Use technology	0	0	1	3	0	2	5	5	7	10	18	80.78
C. Write a literature review	0	0	2	2	3	12	6	4	8	5	9	67.65
D. Form research question or hypothesis	0	1	1	3	3	5	6	12	5	4	11	69.61
E. Choose a research design	1	2	4	2	4	6	6	12	4	5	5	60.59
F. Design & implement sampling strategy	2	3	4	3	5	6	9	8	3	2	6	55.29
G. Design & implement measurement approach	2	3	4	3	6	6	5	10	3	2	7	56.08
H. Design & implement data analysis strategy	2	5	6	3	4	6	5	11	1	3	5	51.76
I. Present study & its implications	1	1	1	6	2	3	4	6	7	11	9	69.61

Correlations were calculated for number of research courses taken and years since the MSW degree with the nine items on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale, as well as the respondent's overall mean for the scale responses. Table 2 below shows the correlation coefficients for each.

**Table 2**

*Correlation Coefficients for Years since MSW and Number of Research Courses, Correlated with Individual Scale Items and the Overall Scale Means*

Confidence that can:	Years since MSW	Number of research courses
A. Search the scholarly literature	-.28*	.24
B. Use technology	-.35**	.13
C. Write a literature review	-.45**	.46**
D. Form research question or hypothesis	-.33*	.28*
E. Choose a research design	-.26	.44**
F. Design & implement sampling strategy	-.32*	.41**
G. Design & implement measurement approach	-.34*	.46**
H. Design & implement data analysis strategy	-.43**	.43**
I. Present study and its implications	-.21	.30*
Mean Score for Scale	-.38**	.42**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

All scale items and the scale mean correlated negatively with the number of years since receiving the MSW degree, indicating that more recent graduates are generally more comfortable with the research-related tasks. Correlations are especially strong for items B (confidence that they can use various technological advances effectively in carrying out research), C (confidence that they can review a particular area of social science theory and research, and write a balanced and comprehensive literature review), H (confidence that they can design and implement the best data analysis strategy possible for the study), and the overall mean score.

Overall, there is a positive correlation between the scale items and the number of research courses taken (the more courses taken, the greater the confidence level). With the exception of the first two scale items, these correlations are generally quite strong.

Finally, independent *t* tests were run comparing membership in a professional organization (0 = no, 1 = yes) on each scale item and comparing subscription to professional journals (regardless of membership; 0 = no, 1 = yes) on each item. In only one case was a significant difference in the groups found: for item QI (confidence in effectively presenting your study and its implications) for journal subscription, where those receiving professional journals were more confident in their ability ( $t = -2.03, p = .048$ ).

## **Interviews**

### ***Sample and Participants***

The sample for the interviews was culled from questionnaire participants who volunteered to participate in the interview process. Ten MSW social workers were interviewed. Participants were selected to provide variance in terms of field of practice.

Fields of practice represented were: child protective services, domestic violence, medical social work (2), mental health (2 adult, 1 child and family), military social work, school social work, and young adult/adolescent services. Two interview participants were male, eight were female. Three of the participants were in supervisory roles, seven in direct practice. A higher percentage than those in the total questionnaire sample hold professional memberships: seven of the ten (70%), as opposed to 35% of the overall sample. Of these seven, four of the professional memberships are accompanied by a journal subscription.

The interview sample also reflected the overall questionnaire sample with regard to universities attended: Colorado State University (3) and the University of Denver (2) were the two most represented programs, along with Loyola University, New Mexico Highlands University, University of Connecticut, University of Maryland, University of Texas – Arlington, with one each. Years since receiving the MSW degree ranged from one to fourteen. This is equal to or fewer than the mean number of years since the MSW for the total questionnaire sample.

Interview participants reported having taken one to four research courses in the MSW studies. All but one applied research, and all but one (a different individual) conducted research. Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale individual mean scores ranged from 55.56 to 83.33; this is at the higher end of the overall sample means and does not include any outliers.

### ***Themes***

Three primary thematic areas were uncovered: the value and use of evidence-based literature in practice decisions; resources; and professional journal articles

themselves. The value and use of evidence-based literature also included a discussion of the concerns with reliance on evidence-based literature to determine best practice. Resources primarily included time issues and other ways of obtaining information. Professional journal articles could be included as a resource. However, the passion elicited in discussion of articles merits considering this separately.

*Value and use of evidence-based literature in practice decisions.* Social workers interviewed for this study were all familiar with and supportive of the concept of evidence-based practice. The ability to learn “what works and to know *why* people think it works” was seen as paramount. Various uses of evidence-based literature included funding and grant applications, the ability to “speak in the language” of other professions by citing evidence for best practice, and the ability to show evidence for changes in expectations and practice policies for staff. One social work supervisor noted that “when jobs are on the line, being able to show the effectiveness of social work through professional literature helps.” The overriding use, however, was in working with clients.

Most social workers who were interviewed see evidence-based literature as one factor in determining how to work with clients: both with regard to treatment modalities and specific techniques to utilize with specific populations. (Other factors cited included supervision, colleague consultation, MSW program textbooks, instincts, and trial and error.) Many of those interviewed turn to evidence-based literature to learn about techniques to use with clients, especially when “stumped,” when they “have tried everything and nothing seems to work.”

Another use of evidence-based literature in work with clients is in providing clients with information, especially about a technique. Several social workers indicated

that they use evidence-based information when suggesting a specific technique or treatment, such as EMDR, to a client. One social worker added a caveat stating that it is essential that she, or any worker, have a true understanding of the technique and can clearly convey it to clients. Given that, she reported that she often discusses what she has learned from the literature in supervision, to ensure a clear and accurate understanding of the technique or to request training in the technique to be able to utilize it in practice. This social worker went on to say that using evidence-based literature “gives me confidence and gives my clients confidence” in techniques.

One social worker expressed ambivalence about evidence-based literature and its use to define best practice: “When I think about what it would be like if we didn’t have it ... the profession would fall apart. But I generally practice through collective agreement. But then sometimes I meet someone academic and realize we are out of date with what we do.” This worker went on to say that in reading articles, he does not “always trust it because in practice it is really hard to operationalize what is effective ... being effective seems to be more about clinician skills, that treatment is more of an art than a science.”

Another social worker, who indicated having previously worked in research, expressed support for evidence-based literature but also expressed concern with it being what she perceives as the primary basis for evidence-based practice:

My concern is that there is only so much that you can prove with quantitative research. But what gets published is what shows that they did X and it worked how. Narrative and existential treatments can be just as effective but are hard to show quantitatively. Certain treatments are more amenable to quantitative research and so seem to have an advantage. It

doesn't seem that qualitative research is as published as quantitative. This is also a problem with billing: I worry that reimbursements will dry up for treatments that are not as readily studied by quantitative methods.

Although others did not express this concern, several social workers did note that insurance companies do request specific treatments based on evidence-based best practices.

**Resources.** Resources were a primary area of discussion for all social workers, both those they used and those they wished were available or more easily available. Of the ten social workers interviewed, three hold no professional memberships, five are NASW members, and two hold memberships in other social work professional organizations (neither of which provides a journal subscription with the membership). However, none of the ten cited a professional membership as a resource for practice information.

The primary resource issue for all social workers interviewed is time. Time limitations include the literal time issues associated with working long hours and being too tired or otherwise busy (i.e., family) in off hours to engage in professional knowledge-building activities. However, time issues far exceeded that obvious problem.

For many, time issues centered on a lack of agency/organizational support for taking work time to search for and read professional articles. As one social worker said, "if a client has a problem, how well do you think it would go over if I asked someone else to handle it so I could continue to study articles?" Some agencies did not seem to offer specific support for utilizing evidence-based practice, expecting social workers to determine best practice by following rules and regulations. Other agencies appear to their

social workers to expect best practices but do not provide time to engage in the practice in a manner that incorporates the learning into routine work activities. Many social workers knew that they could utilize the local university library system, but again, time was at issue: the time taken to travel to and from work and the library and then to search the library databases for articles was seen as prohibitive.

Ability to incorporate professional reading into the work day was very much a time issue for social workers. One social worker indicated that the agency subscribes to a database which has information and articles and that she frequently utilized that database for information. Another indicated that she continues to have access to the library system at the university where she obtained her MSW and that whenever she has “a spare five or ten or fifteen minutes” she would search that database for articles, especially when she has a particularly difficult issue and is interested in learning what techniques have been shown to be effective. A third indicated that her supervisor utilizes professional evidence-based literature in clinical supervision sessions and that is a major resource for her.

Linked to the time issue is another resource issue, the media format of journals and other professional resource information. This is a part of the problem with incorporating learning into the work day. One social worker indicated that she commutes an hour each way to work and that if she could receive a journal on a CD, she would listen to the articles during her commute. Another social worker mentioned that she is a member of NASW and has subscribed to the child welfare section. Those materials are only available on-line. As much of her work time is spent in the community, she is not able to access them during work. She does occasionally print them when at home, but

this is often not possible due to other constraints. However, if she could receive them from NASW in a print format, she “would carry them around with me” and review them whenever she had some “down time – such as while the oil is being changed in the car.”

Social workers do utilize the Internet as a source of information. For nearly all of those interviewed, Google was the primary – and often only – Internet source utilized. All indicated that they have searched and obtained information via Googling, and several “found” good professional journals through Google searches. However, others indicated a degree of unease about the quality of Google searches as a resource, since “some sources you know are good, but others could be put out there by anybody and you don’t really know what you’re getting.”

Some agencies/organizations, most notably the mental health and military settings, provide both in-service trainings and external training and workshops. Social workers in these areas report those trainings and workshops as their primary source of knowledge-building and practice information. One social worker commented, “when I attend a training or workshop, I get all the handouts and read those.” The military also disseminates articles on best practice, and the military social worker interviewed cited those as another major source of information.

Other than the traditional sources of information (such as professional journals, university library article databases, workshops and trainings) and the more contemporary Internet resources, social workers were unaware of professional resources. The NASW sections on evidence-based practice and research, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Campbell Collaboration resources were unknown to all the interviewees.

*Professional Articles.* The third major thematic area, and the one which generated the most passionate discussion, was that of the professional articles themselves. Understanding articles was the primary issue, of which several sub-themes were identified: relevance, structure, and content of the articles. One social worker summed it up thus: “I don’t always understand the articles, and it takes multiple readings to get what it’s about ... some of it is language, some of it is all the research and stats. It doesn’t make sense to what you do ... there’s not enough about how to apply it, not enough case studies with the outcomes.” She went on to say, “when I have to read an article eight times to get it, it doesn’t really seem worth it.”

Several social workers cited relevance as a roadblock to reading the professional literature: research-based articles are viewed as not about “real practice,” and so their applicability is seen as limited. Another social worker noted that it is often a “struggle to find any” articles that apply to the issue or population with which she is working. She does feel that there are probably a number of articles that might be helpful, but because the key words and topics are more peripheral it is difficult to identify them as relevant.

Structure of the articles was also cited as problematic. Several interviewees pointed out that some articles are easy to follow, with clear headings, but others are not. One social worker stated, “I like to review the abstract, introduction, and discussion ... then if the article is interesting or looks helpful, I will go back and read the entire thing. For some articles this is easy to do, and others, not so much.” More than one social worker pointed out that it can be difficult to follow articles, that it seems that important information is lacking or they “don’t flow” logically.

Related to both the structure of articles and the actual content of articles was the issue of language. Several social workers seemed to feel that, as one put it, articles are “written at a higher level than the average practitioner.” Another stated that articles were written in a way that “doesn’t mean a whole lot” to practitioners.

Closely related to structure was the issue of content. Most believed that articles focus too much on the methodology and quantitative results. As one social worker said, “I don’t really care about the standard deviation and – what’s it called? – Chi-square ... what separates BSWs and MSWs from Ph.D.s is interest in that.” A few noted that they simply skim over or even ignore those sections of articles. More than one social worker noted that they trust the editorial review of a journal to ensure that the methodology is strong and the results are accurate. Others indicated that they do not feel qualified to determine the quality of the study itself and assume that the journal staff has carefully reviewed the article for study quality.

Other content concerns focused on the limited or non-existent numbers of actual practice examples. Social workers interviewed indicated a sincere and emphatic appreciation for articles that provided practice examples of the use of a modality or technique. They also expressed an interest in practice examples to explain the research question or issue that gave rise to the study.

Interviewees were nearly unanimous in their desire for a more extensive discussion section in articles. To them, this is the most important section of the article and the one which – they feel – often seems to be the most limited. Social workers interviewed would like to see the discussion section expanded, becoming a greater focus for the article. They would like to see an implications for practice section in all article

discussion sections, one in which practice examples are utilized in a way that applies the outcomes of the study.

Finally, social workers interviewed would like to see more articles that synthesize the evidence-based literature. They would like to see reviews of the literature that “take a specific issue or problem,” review and evaluate the literature, and provide directions for best practice.

### **Summary**

This study has two phases: questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires provided information about social work practitioners’ subscriptions to journals and also included the Brief Research Self Efficacy Scale. Most (65%), of the participants do not subscribe to a professional journal, whether through professional organization memberships or through personal subscriptions. While nearly all (88%) reported having both applied research and conducted research in their MSW studies, several respondents indicated that they were unsure and/or could not accurately remember the number of research courses and/or the nature of research course work undertaken.

The Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale is designed to measure respondents’ confidence with regard to completing a number of research-related tasks. Social work practitioners completing the scale were most comfortable with using technology such as the internet and with searching the scholarly literature. They were least comfortable with their abilities as regards design and implementation: research design, sampling, measurement, and data analysis. However, as one participant noted, “if I could get through the rest, I think I could present it pretty well.”

Overall, individual items on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale correlated negatively with the number of years since receiving the MSW: the longer the time since the MSW degree was received, the lower the confidence of the social worker with regard to the research tasks. All but two of the individual scale items had a significant positive correlation with the number of research courses taken during the MSW studies; the two not significant were the social workers' confidence in their ability to search the literature and to use technology.

Ten social work practitioners were interviewed for this study; interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours in length. The interviews uncovered three primary thematic areas: the value and use of evidence-based literature in practice decisions, resources, and professional journal articles themselves.

While use of evidence-based literature varied, all the social workers interviewed considered evidence-based practice important. Social work practitioners considered the professional literature important for determining best practices, learning new interventions and techniques, providing clients information about interventions, obtaining funding, and policy-making.

Resources, both those available and those they wished were available, were a primary area of discussion. Half of the social workers interviewed are NASW members, and an additional two hold memberships in other professional organizations. This is a much larger representation than with the total questionnaire sample, where only 35% hold professional memberships. The primary resource issue for social workers is time, in terms of long working hours, limited time to search the literature and/or read articles, lack

of agency support for incorporating these activities into the work day, resource formats which make incorporation into the work day easier.

Finally, the thematic area about which social workers were most passionate was that of the professional journal articles themselves. Social workers interviewed cited several roadblocks to using professional journal articles, among which are the relevance to practice, the focus on the research itself, and the inadequacy of the discussion of practice applications.

Overall, participants in the study indicated an appreciation of and value for evidence-based practice and a commitment to engaging in best practices. They generally did not, however, feel that the professional literature fully meets their needs with regard to informing and improving practice.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The social workers interviewed were all thoughtful in their responses and provided both a clear picture of their experiences and compelling arguments for the supports they want in providing best practices. First, let us look at the theory in light of the results of the study, illustrated by an example from one of the social work professionals interviewed. Then, we will discuss the implications of this study's results in terms of support for social work professionals, through social work education, social work publications, and social service agencies.

### **Bloom's Taxonomy and Scholarship**

Traditionally, Bloom's Taxonomy has been viewed as progressive, each level (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) building on the one(s) previous and moving "from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract" (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 212). More recent revisions of the taxonomy utilize two dimensions, but still retain this movement from simple and concrete to complex and abstract. Whichever structure is utilized, this movement through the dimensions is a functional way, both visually and conceptually, to view the taxonomy. But does cognition really move in such a linear fashion?

One way to examine and illustrate the movement of cognition would be to apply Boyer's four functions of scholarship (scholarship of discovery, scholarship of integration, scholarship of application, and scholarship of teaching) to the taxonomy. These four functions of scholarship are also generally seen as something of a continuum, each building to an extent on the previous. In combining the two, the scholarship of

discovery would be especially applicable to the first, second, fourth, and sixth of the taxonomy's cognitive categories: knowledge, comprehension, analysis, and evaluation, respectively. The scholarship of application most closely associates with Bloom's second major category, that of comprehension. Professional scholarship, or the scholarship of integration, at first appears to closely resemble the third (application) and to a lesser extent the fifth (synthesis) categories in Bloom's taxonomy. Finally, the scholarship of education clearly transcends the first (knowledge) and to varying degrees can be applied to all six categories.

Of particular interest to this study is professional scholarship, or the scholarship of integration. But can this function of scholarship be limited to two categories in Bloom's Taxonomy? And is it truly separate from the other functions of scholarship? While this clearly begs further research, we can draw some inferences here. First, let us look at the interrelationships of the various functions of scholarship.

The early definition of scholarship, wherein it refers to "a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn" (Boyer, 1990, p. 15), seems to dovetail nicely with the current expectations of professional social work. NASW standards for social workers require proficiency, current knowledge, critical examination of emerging knowledge, routine review of the professional literature, continuing education, and practice based on recognized knowledge. This blends, rather than separates, the four functions of scholarship. While Boyer's scholarship of practice integrates the knowledge gleaned from discovery and application, it would seem that the three would better be viewed as forming a dynamic relationship, one of interlocking and intersecting circles, for example.

This interlocking circle diagram would also include the scholarship of teaching, which is “not only transmitting knowledge but *transforming* and *extending* it as well” (Boyer, 1990, p. 24). This function of the scholarship of teaching clearly encompasses discovery and application. In social work, as with many professions, an essential part of the educational process is that of practice, wherein the student experiences (with the supervision of both a practicing social worker and the social work faculty) and learns first-hand practical application of course work information.

A similar argument can be made with regard to Bloom’s Taxonomy. The linear nature of the taxonomy is restricting and does not truly reflect professional development. For example, a social worker developing a plan of treatment (synthesis) will necessarily as a part of the process utilize analysis (assessment of client and client systems). However, this assessment and planning process may result in the realization on the part of the social worker that new knowledge is needed. At which point the social worker returns to the first two categories (knowledge and comprehension) to learn new techniques. This new knowledge of techniques is again applied to the assessment and treatment plan before being utilized. This entire process could be seen as integral to the application (third) category, which refers to the use of knowledge in practice. In addition, the final category in the taxonomy, evaluation, is (or should be) an on-going process in social work practice, the results of which often feed activities in one of the earlier categories.

Let us illustrate this with one of the social workers interviewed. The social worker indicated that much of the theory and practice modality information she utilizes was gained in her BSW and MSW studies. When she meets with a new client, she

completes a thorough history and assessment and develops, with the client, a plan of treatment. However, as she and the client move through the treatment process, a given technique may not be effective or at least as effective as they would like. Throughout the treatment process, she evaluates the effectiveness of specific techniques and of the overall process itself. Frequently, she reviews the literature for new and/or additional techniques that might be successful with the particular client. Her review of the literature includes critical evaluation of the literature and an assessment of its applicability to the situation at hand. This may include consultation with colleagues and/or discussion in clinical supervision, both to increase her knowledge and to help further assess the applicability. This completed, she will discuss the technique with the client for incorporation into the treatment plan. And once again she begins a continuing evaluation of its effectiveness.

### **Translational Research**

Based on the results of this study, participating social workers stated a wish for professional journal articles to contain content and focus relevant to practice. This led me to explore another emerging area of scholarship in social work, that of translational research. Translational research has been important in the medical community for several years. The Center for Clinical and Translational Sciences (CCTS), funded by the National Institutes of Health *Roadmap for Medical Research Clinical and Translational Research Award*, defines translational research as:

...includes two areas of translation. One is the process of applying discoveries generated during research in the laboratory, and in preclinical studies, to the development of trials and studies in humans. The second

area of translation concerns research aimed at enhancing the adoption of best practices in the community (CCTS, 2007, para 2).

This translation (laboratory to clinical practice and back, to the community and back) is a major “stumbling block in science, medicine, and public health” (CCTS, 2007, para 3), as noted:

This is partly due to the compartmentalization of research training. Basic scientists are not generally trained to think of the clinical application of their work, clinicians are often not taught to formulate research studies based on clinical observations, and public health scientists may not have a strong background in basic or clinical research (but have the knowledge of the community the other two groups may lack) (CCTS, 2007, para 3).

The first area, the laboratory to clinical practice and back, is referred to as T1 translation; the second (T1 to the community and back) is referred to as T2 translation. The main goal of the CCTS is to replace “T1 and T2 translation with one smooth and rapid process of discovery, clinical application, and public knowledge” (CCTS, 2007, para 5).

The Translational Research Working Group (TRWG) of the National Cancer Institute depicts translational research as an interactive process: circles representing the lab, the clinic, and the population each have dual-directional arrows between them, with larger arrows from this collective to “new tools and new applications” and back. They also present a Translational Continuum, with five steps: basic science discovery, early translation, late translation, dissemination, and adoption. The first three stages focus on laboratory research, partnerships and collaboration, and the clinical trials for medical research. The dissemination phase provides the results of these research efforts to

community health providers and to patients and the public. The adoption stage includes not only adoption (of the new drug, device, intervention, materials, and/or training) by providers, patients, and the public but also putting in place payment mechanisms to enable the adoption.

This continuum, and translational research efforts in general, reflect elements of both Bloom's Taxonomy and Boyer's four functions of scholarship. Yet translational research also goes beyond both in that it seeks to build a more seamless interconnection and reciprocal interaction between researchers, practitioners, and clients. Social work practitioners who participated in this research study seem to be asking for more interconnection between practice and research. An increased emphasis on translational research in social work may provide students and practitioners with a way to use research to inform their practice.

In the medical field, the Central Society for Clinical Research publishes *Translational Research: The Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine*. This journal is "interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in scope" and "keeps readers up-to-date on significant biomedical research from all subspecialties of internal medicine" (Central Society for Clinical Research, n.d., para 3). In the fourth quarter of 2009, *Science* magazine (a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science) will begin publishing *Science Translational Medicine*. Its mission statement is "to promote health by facilitating communication and cooperation among those dedicated to basic, translation, and clinical research and its application" (*Science*, n.d., para 1). The stated purpose of the new journal reads:

In the last few decades global efforts toward scientific and medical research have been notably successful ... The results of this work are published in scientific journals, after undergoing peer review by other scientists. But there is a vast disconnect between these basic biomedical advances reported in the pages of journals and the application of these advances for diagnoses, treatments, and cures. A critical need exists for a forum whereby scientists and physicians for all disciplines can present and analyze the applications of these discoveries. *Science Translational Medicine* will fill that gap, known as the “valley of death” by some, promoting health by facilitating communication and cooperation among those dedicated to basic, translational, and clinical research and its application (*Science*, n.d., para 2).

This resonates: it clearly reflects the experience and concerns that social work professionals expressed in this study.

Why is translational research important to social work? Beyond its direct applicability to social work, which we will discuss in more depth later, this can serve as both a wake-up call and a model for the future of social work. Social work and medicine are both professions and face many of the same challenges. It is important to note that the definitions of evidence-based practice and best practice utilized by the social work profession originated with medicine. Further, it is in medicine where the ideas of translational research have been developed.

## **Research Self-Efficacy**

At first blush, it seems that the interviews contradict the results of the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale. Individual mean scores for the interview sample ranged from 55.56 to 83.33, while the overall questionnaire sample mean was 65.21. And yet, those interviewed indicated a discomfort with research activities, especially statistical analyses. This led me to a closer examination of the scores for those interviewed. Of those interviewed, three had scores below the total sample mean, in the 50s; two had means approximating the sample mean; two had mean scores in the 70s; and three had mean scores in the 80s. Thus, eight out of ten had scores at or higher than the total sample, with no outliers. There does not appear to be a relationship with years since receiving the MSW, since the three highest scores (in the 80s) were individuals who had received the MSW degree fourteen, four, and one years previously. The three lowest scores (in the 50s), received the MSW six (2) and three years previously.

What of the individual items? The first three items on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale can be viewed as connected and as related to searching the literature. The next five items are interrelated and reflect stages in traditional research methodologies: formulating a research question/hypothesis, selecting a research design, sampling, measurement, and data analysis. The last item on the Scale addresses comfort with implementation and presentation of findings.

Social workers interviewed generally rated their comfort levels very high for the first four questions, especially the first two. For the five methodological questions, their scores were appreciably lower: anywhere from 20 to (in one case) 70 percentile points

lower, but generally 30 percentile points lower. This is similar to the findings for the overall sample.

Yet the individuals interviewed emphatically expressed concern about the research focus of articles. Many indicated that the research focus, and the space devoted to methodology and results, was a primary barrier to utilization of the professional literature. This study did not devote time in the interviews to the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale items, nor to the interviewees' responses on the scale. This would be interesting for further research, especially a study which asks respondents to complete the scale and then interviews them with regard to the scale items, especially relating them to current activities. We can, however, speculate about this seeming disconnect between the Scale responses and the interview responses.

First and foremost, it is important to remember that the social workers interviewed focused on *what they need/want* from the professional literature. They did not want to have to "wade through" the methodology and results sections, but wished a greater focus on the discussion section and on applications to practice. While several social workers interviewed indicated a lack of knowledge about methodologies and statistical analyses, this was often in the context of "I don't remember" or "I'm not interested in" those areas. It may be that when responding to the scale questions, the frame of reference for the participants was their MSW course work and they were not uncomfortable with (or did not recall being uncomfortable with) the coursework itself, possibly were even very successful in the coursework.

Closely linked to this, I believe, is the fact that time was a major issue for social workers. "Wading through" methodology and results sections can be time-consuming.

Several social workers interviewed indicated that, as available time for reading the literature is limited, they wished that time to be as productive as possible. This, coupled with the desire for more practice applications in articles, may simply reflect a practice reality and practitioner needs and preferences, rather than a lack of comfort with research activities and tasks.

The self-selecting nature of the interview participants cannot be discounted. A greater percentage (than in the total sample) of the interviewees hold professional memberships, which could be construed to indicate a greater professional interest. It is possible that those who volunteered to be interviewed for the study are more interested in the issue under study. However, just over 40% (21 of 51) of the questionnaire sample volunteered to be interviewed, and those interviewed were deliberately selected to reflect a variety of fields of practice. It is therefore likely that they do reflect the overall sample. It is also possible that our old friend time is at play here, and those who volunteered for interviews were more willing (or able) to carve out time for the interview. Or, it may be that those who rated their comfort levels as especially low simply did not want to be interviewed, whether through lack of interest or through discomfort with the topic itself or even through a degree of embarrassment with their self-perceived abilities.

Finally, this is an area that begs further examination in future research. Did respondents over-rate their comfort and confidence on the Brief Research Self-Efficacy Scale? Is the issue not one of lack of comfort and confidence but one of lack of interest? Is that possible lack of interest linked to a perceived lack of applicability to practice? Or is this simply a rating issue? How do respondents perceive their rated confidence? (When placed on a grading scale, scores in the 50s and 60s are failing grades.)

## **Continuing Education**

It is interesting to note that until 2009 Colorado did not require continuing education to maintain clinical licensure. While some interviewees indicate that their agencies do provide extensive in-service trainings and financial support to attend workshops, others report limited or no agency support for continuing education activities.

An opportunity for further research would be to duplicate this study in a state(s) where continuing education is required for licensure retention. Do variances in state continuing education requirements affect social workers' usage of professional literature? It is possible that the resources provided by trainings and workshops would result in a greater utilization of the professional literature. It is also possible that social workers in states requiring continuing education would rely solely or predominantly on workshop/training information to inform practice and would exhibit a lower utilization of the literature.

Another area for further study would be to look at differences in agency/organizational support. Is there a difference among agencies between states that require continuing education units (CEUs) and those that do not? Does the number and nature of CEUs required result in differences in agency support? In what types of supports do agencies engage: in-service, workshops, outside training, internal libraries? In states where CEUs are required, is agency support for utilization of professional literature (i.e., work time for these activities, agency subscriptions to professional journals) different?

## **Support for Social Work Practitioners**

Based on the interviews, I have come to believe that we, social work professionals, need to examine and reframe our support of practitioners as it pertains to research and evidence-based practice. In social work, we often utilize the strengths perspective with clients: focusing on client values, abilities, and goals, then working with the client build on abilities and reduce or eliminate barriers to those goals. The social work profession – social work academia, researchers, professional organizations, and professional publications – may benefit from taking this same approach to practitioners and viewing practitioners as consumers. In this scenario, the values, skills (strengths), and goals of the practitioner become paramount; the goals of professional organizations and of social work research would be determined by practitioner needs and goals. Thus, if the goal of practitioners is to engage in best practices, then it behooves social work researchers, professional organizations, professional publications, social work educators, and agencies who employ social workers to examine ways they can best support that goal. What tools can each provide to support practitioners in those efforts?

Where does the profession go from here? The overriding conclusion is that social work may need to rethink its approach to research. Perhaps efforts designed to make research more friendly and useful for social work practitioners are needed. The most fundamental purpose of research is further knowledge that informs and supports social work practice. It is crucial that additional strategies that translate research into social work practice are identified.

### ***Social Work Education***

First, social work education could take the lead and re-examine its research focus, not only because most social work research comes from academia but also because social work education is where practicing social workers learn both social work practice and research. Let us begin with suggestions for social work research courses.

While I have no doubt that there are individual faculty, and even individual programs, who engage in innovative approaches to teaching research, the overall focus remains fairly consistent. We should carefully examine the goals of social work research. At this time, most social work professionals are consumers rather than practitioners of research. Whether this consumerism is born of necessity or choice, it is the reality of social work practice. Social work programs, at both the BSW and MSW levels, could recognize this and support it. This does not mean that we should not teach research methods. First, it is difficult to be an informed and critical consumer of the literature without a solid understanding of the various methodologies. Secondly, practitioners should be prepared to assume a research role as practice, agencies, and funding sources demand it. This requires a balance of practice and research that has yet to be defined.

Research textbooks might be re-examined with regard to focus. It is possible that we need textbooks that have a strong focus on the student as a consumer of research. Practice textbooks might also be re-examined such that students better appreciate the inextricable connection between research and practice.

Many social work educational programs require that students conduct research during the BSW or MSW studies. Students may increase appreciation of the research experience if direct and explicit linkages are made to social work practice (translational

research). One line of inquiry for future research could be to investigate ways that practitioners think this educational content and process should be.

If a research project is a part of the curriculum, it may well fall to the social work faculty to guide the students with regard to applicability. Involvement of practitioners (and/or agencies) in research projects may be increasing because of the demand for data from funding sources. A case study of an organization that is moving in the direction of evidence-based practice could provide a wealth of information about the use of research and its application.

In addition, the professional literature and its application could be an integral part of all practice classes and used as an opportunity for on-going knowledge building. Rather than simply have students review literature, assignments might explicitly require students to utilize the higher order thinking skills to apply, synthesize, and evaluate the relevance and practicality of research studies to practice.

Finally, there is no good served by the profession providing practitioners resources that are not utilized. Social work practitioners interviewed for this study were generally unaware of resources available, relying primarily on “Google” searches to obtain information. Resources such as the NASW website sections devoted to evidence-based practice and research, the National Institute of Mental Health website, and the Campbell Collaboration cannot serve as a resource if practitioners are unaware of them. It is incumbent upon social work education not only to provide students with an awareness of these and other resources but also to provide them with the experiences that help them incorporate usage of such resources into daily practice.

What of academics as researchers? While academia and professional practice do collaborate, often such collaborations are passive (on the part of social work practitioners) and take the form of professional practice providing the setting for academic research, sometimes at the request of the organization/agency but more often at the request of the academic researcher. In response to the research participants' expressed desire for increased integration and availability of research to inform their practice, I would suggest that academic-practice collaborations could be more active and more of a partnership. Not only could practitioners be actively involved in every phase of conducting the research but they could also be an integral participant in identifying the research question. Rather than research a specific area of interest to the researcher, social work practitioners should be engaged as full partners in the research endeavor. The Social Work Research Center at Colorado State University utilizes this approach with child welfare practitioners (Social Work Research Center). Practitioners generate the research question and collaborate with researchers regarding research methodology and data sources. Researchers collect data, analyze data, and report data. Practitioners are once again asked to interpret the relevance and meaning of the data for practice. It would be very interesting to study this process from the perspectives of both the practitioners and the researchers (a translational research project).

During the educational experience, students may also benefit from this approach. The student research team becomes a triad: the faculty member, the field supervisor, and the student(s) in the agency. The student(s) and field supervisor can work to identify a practice problem/issue/question that they would like to explore. The faculty member can guide the methodological process and work with them to understand the issues at each

step of the process. All can interpret the applicability of the findings to social work practice. Such activities could serve to build researcher-practitioner bonds as well as to help students see the applicability of research to practice.

We all, students included, tend to remember those things about which we are passionate and/or those which we experience. For social workers, the research knowledge and research experiences are frequently mentally discarded (or at least “filed away”) once the course is completed. The data in this study bear this out, as social workers interviewed frequently indicated they “do not remember” or “do not care about it” when discussing research methodologies and data analyses, especially in journal articles. It is incumbent on social work programs to socialize students for life-long learning that supports and informs practice and to instill the importance of research such that it is utilized in daily practice.

### ***Social Work Publications***

One social worker interviewed expressed concern with the fact that most social work journals seem to favor quantitative research and that narrative and existential treatments, which can be more difficult to quantify, are often neglected. Others indicated that articles generally seem more focused on the research than application. Some practitioners indicated a wish to see more systematic reviews of the current literature/research with best practice applications. All these point to a need for a change in focus with regard to practice journals. Perhaps a wider range of journals could consider adaptations that acknowledge the social work practitioner as the primary reader of the journal articles.

The concept of translational research and the building of the links between research, practice, and clients can be a prime model for social work. The social work journal which most closely approximates the translational research model is *Research on Social Work Practice*, a publication of the Society for Social Work and Research. This journal describes itself as a:

...disciplinary journal devoted to the publication of empirical research concerning the methods and outcomes of social work practice. Social work practice is broadly interpreted to refer to the application of intentionally designed social work intervention programs to problems of societal and/or interpersonal importance, including behavior analysis or psychotherapy involving individuals; case management; practice involving couples, families, and small groups; community practice; education; and the evaluation of social policies... The journal will serve as an outlet for the publication of original reports of empirically based evaluation studies on the outcomes of social work practice; reports on the development and validation of new methods of assessment for use in social work practice; and empirically based reviews of the practice literature that provide direct applications to social work practice. (Research on Social Work Practice, 2009, frontpiece, para 1-2)

Investigating the usefulness of this journal for practitioners would be an interesting line for future research. *The Journal of Research on Social Work Practice* has a relatively small number of subscribers and it would be interesting to know what proportion are practitioners compared to researchers and other academics. Research that identifies what

social workers consider to be the most and least helpful components of journal articles could be used to inform editorial practices. Similarly, it would be interesting to investigate the ways that researchers perceive their work and its impact on practice.

From my early practice years, I can remember a practice journal, but it is no longer in publication and a Google search did not provide any historical information about that journal. An additional search of social work journals (both Google and through publishing websites such as Sage and NASW) did discover a number of practice-focused journals. However, these took one of three forms: university-based (for example, the Hawaii Pacific *Journal of Social Work Practice* and Bemidji State's *Journal of Social Work Theory and Practice*), foreign (Great Britain and Australia, in particular, publish a number of practice-based journals), or specialty (such as addictions, values and ethics, disability and rehabilitation, geriatrics, child and family).

*Advances in Social Work*, a journal published by the Indiana University School of Social Work, is one university-based publication which, like *Research on Social Work Practice*, approximates the translational research model. This journal

... is committed to enhancing the linkage among social work practice, research, and education. Accordingly, the journal addresses current issues, challenges, and responses facing social work practice and education. The journal invites discussion and development of innovations for social work research and education. *Advances in Social Work* seeks to publish, empirical, conceptual, and theoretical articles that make substantial contributions to the field in all areas of social work ... The journal provides a forum for scholarly exchange of research findings and

ideas that advance knowledge and inform social work practice. All relevant methods of inquiry are welcome (*Advances in Social Work*, n.d., para 1).

Finally, one of the practice-based journals located, published by Harvard University, was available for just five months. This begs several questions: Why do practice-based journals seem to not be successful and/or to have a reduced “shelf life”? Is this a reflection of publishing trends or does it indicate a lack of utilization by practitioners? How could they be disseminated differently to extend this “shelf life”? This could prove an interesting area for future research.

Beyond this, I would propose existing journals evaluate their purposes and determine if one of their goals is to inform practitioners with information about best practices for social workers in all fields of practice. If so, articles could be selected for publication that provide systematic reviews of the literature on a specific topic, issue, or problem and only review the literature but also critique it for best practices and applications. Articles presenting results of specific studies could focus on the discussion of and application of the outcomes. Such articles would need only a brief description of the methodology and results – enough that the reader understands the gist of the study mechanisms and outcomes. The quality and appropriateness of the research methodology, instrumentation, and analysis would be left to peer reviews. Given the lack of enthusiasm for “practice journals,” perhaps a hybrid model (designed for both researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners) of professional journals could be published and evaluated.

One thing that supports this hybrid model is that social work practitioners consistently requested (with regard to professional journal articles) that, in the words of one interviewee, they be able to “trust the journal not to publish a study unless it is” well-conducted and accurately reported. They want the peer-review process to ensure the quality of the study and results, but do not want to have to wade through those. One way this could be accomplished would be for submissions to the journal to be accompanied by a longer supporting document which are archived and available to provide a more detailed explanation of the methodology and results (than found in the article’s summary of those).

Revising the purpose and goals of social work journals to include social work practitioners as a primary readership would require thoughtful adjustments to the editorial process. For example, editorial and/or advisory boards should probably include practitioner representation.

Finally, several of those interviewed expressed a need for a choice of formats: some would like print, some would prefer computer discs, and others prefer internet access. While different formats are utilized by various social work professional organizations and journals, generally there is not a choice of format available. A survey that explores the preferences of social workers with regard to access to research literature would be important.

The various issues related to social work publications can provide a number of areas for future research. One possibility would be to look at actual utilization by social workers who receive journal subscriptions through professional memberships. Do they review and read articles? Or does the journal sit in an eternal “to get to” pile? And what

of social workers who work in agencies that subscribe to journals? Do they read and utilize articles differently from those whose agencies do not provide this resource? Finally, it would be especially interesting to ask social workers to review a series of articles (systematic reviews of the literature, translational research publications, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, etc.) and rate them on a number of areas, such as perceived applicability to practice and ease of understanding.

### ***Social Service Organizations/Agencies***

What of social work agencies? From the interviews, it is clear that social workers do utilize those resources available (and of which they are aware). Agencies that want social workers to engage in best practices (and why would they not?) should provide them with the resources necessary, or at least contribute to this provision.

First and foremost, social workers expressed a desire and need for agency/organizational support for evidence-based practice efforts. While time spent in these efforts is not directly productive, the resulting more effective practice would be well worth it. Some organizations, most notably the military, provide social workers both with distilled information about best practices and with training for new techniques so identified. Social work practitioners in agencies that do not engage in these practices may need to become strong advocates for obtaining necessary resources, both concrete and time resources.

As stated in the beginning of this section, social workers report that they will utilize available resources. This is an important lesson for both practitioners and agencies/organizations. For several years, social service agency budgets have been tight. When the primary budget item is salaries, as it is for many social service agencies,

conference and training expenditures may be the first to be deleted. In-house libraries, journal subscriptions, and on-line database subscriptions are an excellent resource and, since they are a resource for all staff, are less expensive than workshops and conferences.

Further, agencies could look to more creative solutions for providing in-service trainings to staff. Partnering with schools of social work not only for research activities but also for presentations and trainings can prove to be an excellent resource for both. Students can benefit from hearing practitioners discuss practice situations and issues. Agency social workers can benefit from the current knowledge of social work faculty with regards to best practices. And everyone can benefit from the application of research to practice incorporated throughout.

Interestingly, not one social worker mentioned using research to assess and evaluate her/his own practice. Nor did any one discuss assessing the success of knowledge gained from evidence-based literature and applied to practice. When asked, all said they do not engage in practice evaluation other than discussions of specific practice issues during clinical supervision.

A few indicated that their agencies engage in program evaluation. At this point it is only possible to speculate about this. It may be that agencies do engage in program evaluation but do not share the results with workers, or that sharing of results is limited and workers do not realize the source of the information. One common concern for social work practitioners is the amount of paperwork they must complete. In many agencies, the information collected through practitioner forms and paperwork is analyzed for program evaluation. However, too often this program evaluation information is not made available to the practitioners. Even when evaluation summaries are made available,

it is often not clear to social worker practitioners where the data originated, that the paperwork that they complete on a regular basis contributes to this, or what the results mean to them in their jobs. If social workers were more aware of the evaluation processes and were made active participants, they would likely be more conscientious in the collection of data and would be able to better apply the results to their practices. This could certainly provide a line of inquiry for further research.

It would also be a reasonable deduction that the issues of time and lack of agency support contribute to a lack of formal practice evaluation. A line of future research could be to examine this more closely. What do social workers do with regard to practice evaluation? What are the differences between those who engage in practice evaluation and those who do not? What factors impact social work practice evaluation? An understanding of the practices of social workers could have a direct impact on their ability to assess the quality, relevance, and applicability of a published article, as the skills stay current.

### **Summary**

Through the interviews we have seen that social work professionals value evidence-based literature and wish to utilize it in practice decisions, want more resources to help them engage in best practices, and would like to see changes in professional journal articles to make them more applicable to practicing social workers. As a profession, we must find ways to make research and evidence-based literature more useful and friendly to practicing social workers. This has implications for social work education, social work publications, and social service agencies and organizations. Support of social work practitioners and recognition of the realities of social work

practice should be a primary concern, of social work education, of social work publications, and of social service agencies and organizations.

As Bob Dylan (*It's Alright, Ma*) told us, "... he not busy being born is busy dying." This, to me, sums the use of evidence-based professional literature to inform and improve social work practice. Professional standards include the directives that "social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice" (NASW, 2008). This means that social workers should be continually learning (being born), rather than – like Wilson in the early example – limit their knowledge to what they learned in school, however long ago that may have been. Evidence-based literature is a key tool to aid in those efforts.

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**APPENDIX A: BLOOM'S TAXONOMY CATEGORIES AND  
SUBCATEGORIES**

1. Knowledge
  - a. Knowledge of specifics
    - i. Knowledge of terminology
    - ii. Knowledge of specific facts
  - b. Knowledge of ways and means of dealing with specifics
    - i. Knowledge of conventions
    - ii. Knowledge of trends and sequences
    - iii. Knowledge of classifications and categories
    - iv. Knowledge of criteria
    - v. Knowledge of methodology
  - c. Knowledge of universals and abstractions in a field
    - i. Knowledge of principles and generalizations
    - ii. Knowledge of theories and structures
2. Comprehension
  - a. Translation
  - b. Interpretation
  - c. Extrapolation
3. Application
4. Analysis
  - a. Analysis of elements
  - b. Analysis of relationships

c. Analysis of organizational principles

5. Synthesis

a. Production of a unique communication

b. Production of a plan, or proposed set of operations

c. Derivation of a set of abstract relations

6. Evaluation

a. Evaluation in terms of internal evidence

b. Judgments in terms of external criteria (Kratwohl, 2002, p. 213)

## APPENDIX B: CONTACT LETTER



School of Social Work  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1586  
Phone (970) 491-6612  
Fax (970) 491-7280

February 11, 2009

Dear MSW Social Worker:

You are being asked, as an MSW-level practicing social worker, to participate in the dissertation research study of Kathryn Kidd. The purpose of this study is to look at evidence-based professional literature and its application to and use by practicing MSW social workers. Participation in either or both phases of the study is voluntary.

The first phase of the study is a brief questionnaire, which will take only a few minutes to complete, and which will be completed during this meeting. All responses will be held completely confidential. If you so choose, your responses may also be anonymous.

The second phase of the study involves your willingness to participate in a personal interview. If you wish to participate, this interview will be held at a time and place that is convenient to you. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately an hour, but whatever time you wish and/or require will be made available to you. Interviews will be audio-taped, and all conversations and information provided in the interviews will be held in complete confidence.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this study with us, we would be happy to do so. Our contact information is provided below; please feel free to contact either or both of us. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this study, please contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, Colorado State University, at 970-491-1655.

Thank you very much for your time and participation in this study.

Sincerely,

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## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



School of Social Work  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1586  
Phone (970) 491-6612  
Fax (970) 491-7280

February 11, 2009

Dear MSW Social Worker:

You are being asked, as an MSW-level practicing social worker, to participate in the dissertation research study of Kathryn Kidd, titled *Using Evidence-based Literature to Inform and Improve Social Work Practice*. The purpose of this study is to look at evidence-based professional literature and its application to and use by practicing MSW social workers. It is hoped that by understanding social workers' experiences with evidence-based literature – especially what is helpful and what is not, what supports this use and what are barriers to this use – social work education, social work agencies and organizations, and social work researchers all might better support practicing social workers.

The first phase of the study is a brief questionnaire, which will take only a few minutes to complete, and which will be completed during this meeting. All responses will be held completely confidential. If you so choose, your responses may also be anonymous. The second phase of the study involves your willingness to participate in a personal interview. If you wish to participate, this interview will be held at a time and place that is convenient to you. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately an hour, but whatever time you wish and/or require will be made available to you. Interviews will be audio-taped, and all conversations and information provided in the interviews will be held in complete confidence. All audio-tapes will be destroyed within five years of the conclusion of the study. No identifying information will be included in the database, for questionnaires or interviews.

Participation is voluntary. There are no anticipated risks associated with this study, nor is any compensation provided. There are no consequences to participation or non-participation.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this study with us, we would be happy to do so. Our contact information is provided below; please feel free to contact either or both of us. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this study, please contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, Colorado State University, at 970-491-1655.

Thank you very much for your time and participation in this study.

I agree, as an MSW-level practicing social worker, to participate in the dissertation research study of Kathryn Kidd. I have read the above information and understand that the purpose of this study is to look at evidence-based professional literature and its application to and use by practicing MSW social workers. I also understand that participation in the study is voluntary, that I may conclude the interview at any point I wish, and that all my responses will be confidential.

By my signature below, I agree to participate in this study and agree to have my interview audio-taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Please Print)

**APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. In what field of practice do you work? \_\_\_\_\_
2. When did you receive (in what year) your MSW? \_\_\_\_\_
3. From what school did you receive your MSW? \_\_\_\_\_
4. In your MSW program:
  - a. How many research courses did you have? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Did you apply research as part of the MSW studies? Yes / No
  - c. Did you conduct research as part of the MSW studies? Yes / No

5. To what professional organizations do you belong? Do you receive a professional journal with your membership?

Organization Name

Journal with membership?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Yes / No  
Yes / No  
Yes / No

6. Do you subscribe to or regularly access any other professional journals? Which ones? Please indicate source (subscription, work, on-line, etc.) for each.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*  
Are you interested in participating in an individual interview? If yes, please complete the contact information below. If you do not want to participate in an individual interview, please leave these three lines blank.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

We would like to know how confident you are in your ability to perform specific social work tasks. After you consider each task, please rate your confidence in your ability to perform that task successfully by **circling** the number from 0 to 100 that best describes your level of confidence. We want to know how confident you are that you could successfully perform these tasks today. **There are no correct or incorrect responses to the questions.**

<i>How confident are you that you can ...</i>	<i>Cannot do at all</i>	<i>Moderately certain can do</i>								<i>Certain can do</i>	
	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
a. do effective electronic database searching of the scholarly literature?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
b. use various technological advances effectively in carrying out research (e.g., the Internet)?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
c. review a particular area of social science theory and research, and write a balanced and comprehensive literature review?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
d. formulate a clear research question or testable hypothesis?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
e. choose a research design that will answer a set of research questions and/or test a set of hypotheses about some aspect of practice?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
f. design and implement the best sampling strategy possible for your study of some aspect of practice?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
g. design and implement the best measurement approach possible for your study of some aspect of practice?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
h. design and implement the best data analysis strategy possible for your study of some aspect of practice?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
i. effectively present your study and it's implications?	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

Thank you very much for your time and participation!

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I am studying the types of information that you use to help you in your practice.

Let's start with you briefly describing what your job is. – (Probes: what are some of the practices, interventions, treatments, therapies you use?)

What informs your decision-making about your practice? (Probes: How do you decide what to do and how to do it? Where do you usually access the information you use?)

How do you perceive the value of evidenced-based literature to the practice of social work? By evidenced-based, I am referring to research-based articles published in professional journals.

Specifically tell me about your use of evidence-based literature. How does or doesn't information from professional journal articles influence your work? Give me some examples.

If you do use evidence-based literature, what do you think the benefits are? What are some of the roadblocks for using it?

If you don't use evidenced-based literature, why not? (Probe: what are some of the roadblocks?)

What would make evidenced-based literature more useful/accessible to your practice? (Probes: what would you change – and why – to make evidenced base literature factor more into your work [your training, support in your workplace, the type of research in the journals, professional organization support]?)

Anything you would add that we haven't covered?

Thank you for your time.

*(May always ask "can you elaborate" or "explain that to me" or "please give me an example")*