

A SCOPING REVIEW OF SOCIAL WORK EVIDENCE: DEFINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTION

Asiyah Kassim^{1*}

¹Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*E-mail: asiyah@uitm.edu.my

1. INTRODUCTION

There is growing attention on the need for all health and care professionals to be able to exhibit the effectiveness of their work. The need to understand what works in current social work practice is vital to understand the effectiveness of social work models of intervention and develop an evidence base that helps raise the quality of social work. This is depicted in the call for social work training and education to produce three main outcomes, namely the social worker as professional, the social worker as a practitioner, and the social worker as a social scientist that can understand and apply to their social work practice, the relevant principles, methods, and knowledge of social work as well as seeking to expand the understanding of social work through research and accumulating evidence (Croisdale-Appleby, 2019). However, many policymakers and practitioners find it difficult to access good-quality evidence on the effectiveness of social work interventions (Romeo, 2020). Research into social work practice is an evolving field hence, the need to investigate this concern is timely. This review thus aims to provide policymakers and practitioners an overview of the evidence on the effectiveness of social work with adults by assembling existing published research and identifying the existence of gaps by specifically answering this question: ‘What do we know about the effectiveness of social work with adults and how has it been measured?’. Social work with adults involves several different roles and functions, ranging from assessing, reviewing, and providing help to an individual, family, or career with complex family or social care needs, supporting people with complex or life-limiting health conditions, and safeguarding people at risk of abuse and neglect (The College of Social Work, 2018). This review does not concentrate on any single aspect of these but instead takes a broad-brush approach. This is a vital preliminary task in identifying the direction of any future work investigating specific areas of practice. The premise for ‘social work with adults’ was broad as it includes social work with different types of service users such as adults with a learning disability, mental health problem, or specific disability. From a wider perspective, the review seeks to identify broad topic areas where published empirical research was available and those where evidence was emerging, or which were under-researched.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research used scoping review methodology to answer the question. There is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes a scoping review and how it should be conducted. Like systematic reviews, scoping reviews offer a systematic and transparent way of identifying published research. However, unlike systematic reviews, they rarely attempt to assess the methodological quality of individual studies. They generally have broader inclusion criteria in terms of which types of research design will be eligible (Peters et al., 2015). The

criteria of inclusion for this review include research about social work with people aged 18 and over, and descriptive of social workers' effectiveness either on their own or as members of a multidisciplinary discourse. A combination of searches of electronic bibliographic databases and general internet searches was done. Priority searches were done through the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD) database as this was developed by searching the bibliographic databases MEDLINE, Embase, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and PubMed. Additional searches were made of the databases Sociological Abstracts, Social Care Online, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Social Services Abstracts, PsychINFO, PubMed, Scopus, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Proquest Research Library and Medline using a mixture of fixed terms and free text using truncations of social work*, outcome*, effective*, satisf*, "social worker," and "social welfare." Hand searches were also made of the tables of contents of the British Journal of Social Work and Research on Social Work Practice. A summary of the abstraction process and eligibility criteria are presented in Figure 1. Any articles not written in English and published before 1995 were excluded. This is because the roles and functions of social workers have changed considerably over the past two decades and since organisational, policy, and practice contexts that existed at the time were very different from those operating today (BASW, 2020). In addition, research about children and young people, parents in receipt of children and family services, and social work within criminal justice settings were excluded. This review also excluded publications that were not peer-reviewed, such as reports and other products from the grey literature. A more in-depth review was then conducted to determine whether the article examined social work intervention for adults within the context of research, which is based on whether the findings and conclusions of the article could inform policies, programs, and research on social work for adults. Finally, this review is limited to articles reporting empirical findings.

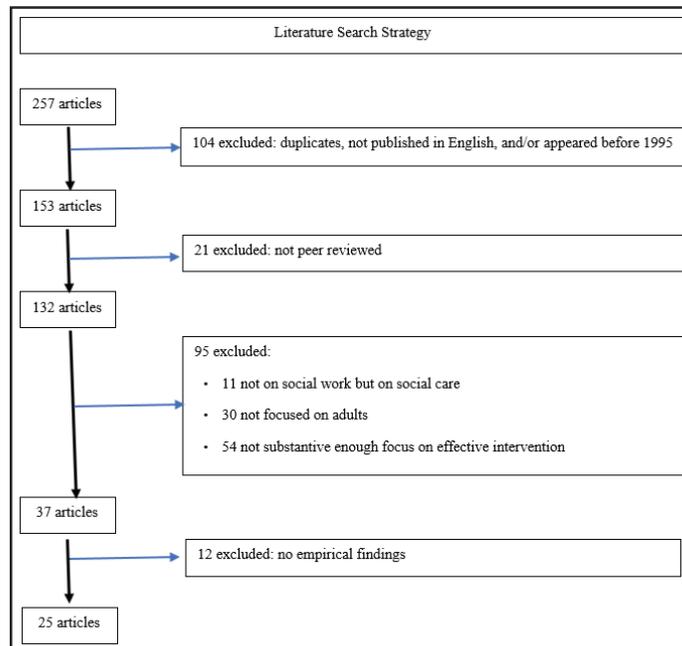


Figure 1: Literature Search Strategy and Exclusion Criteria

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

25 articles were identified from the social work literature that focuses on the effectiveness of social work intervention. To address the question posed for this review, the discussion is segmented into measures, types of effectiveness, and structure of assessment. Seven items included in this review (Mullen & Shuluk, 2020; Rosen et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2018) consisted of general overviews of social work effectiveness, almost all of which were based on research undertaken in the United States and the United Kingdom. The effectiveness is measured through various means such as service user and carer satisfaction, changes to the quality of life and wellbeing, cost-effectiveness, and placement stability while social workers' effectiveness was largely based on a combination of skills. This included assessment, knowledge about local resources, and the ability to provide counseling and/or ongoing support. Many evidence suggesting that many of the clients who participated in social work interventions did better than the average client who did not (Gorey et al, 2018, Milne et al., 2017, Moriarty et al., 2015). Likewise, Mullen and Shuluk (2020) considered that it was 'reasonable to conclude that approximately two-thirds of clients served by social workers benefit in measurable ways.' On the other hand, several studies considered whether different types of the theoretical framework for social work interventions led to different results (Boutin-Foster et. al, 2017). Indeed, they argued, a range of theoretical models might be most effective depending upon what was needed. An article by (Chan & Holosko, 2016) considered the role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in enhancing the effectiveness of social work interventions. Different types of intervention were identified including online forums, virtual environments, and telephone contacts to enhance adherence to the intervention. The articles concluded that results were generally positive but that more work was needed on identifying the methods by which different aspects of intervention worked.

Two important considerations stem from these findings. The first is an argument that people using services had a 'right' to receive effective social work interventions. This raises an important question about who decides which types of approaches are effective and what happens if individuals disagree with the support they are offered. The second is prompted by the significantly high percentage of social work interventions that do not appear to be effective. Many of the articles asked the question, 'under what circumstances is social work ineffective?' However, there are some circumstances in which it seems to be more difficult for social workers to deliver the best possible support. Here, research reporting the views of practitioners and service users, and carers become an important part of understanding circumstances in which improvements could be made. The review also identified a decline in interest in the quality and nature of the service user and practitioner relationship which they argued was increasingly seen in procedural, legal, and administrative terms and not as an indicator of practice effectiveness which was discussed substantially. Moreover, the review showed the centrality of assessments to the social work role but most of it was about the experience of being assessed, rather than the extent to which assessments were successful in identifying support needs and arranging the right amount of support (Cheetham et al., 2016). This has led to an argument that the failure to give enough attention to reviewing assessments meant that opportunities to identify whether they were meeting their objectives were under-utilised. It is also observed that since the community care changes since the 1990s, assessment practice has been increasingly focused on demonstrating a person's 'eligibility to receive a service' rather than on 'individual need'. It also suggested through the reviews that many people's experience of social work and social care does not progress beyond the point of assessment as they are deemed to be ineligible for any further support.

4. CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of social work with adults has been measured in several different ways, including service user and carer satisfaction, changes to the quality of life and wellbeing, cost-effectiveness, and placement stability. The reviews suggested that social workers' effectiveness was largely based on a combination of skills. This included assessment, knowledge about local resources, and the ability to provide counseling and/or ongoing support. It is important to note that social work with adults generally takes place in difficult circumstances when individuals and their families are under great stress and the potential for positive outcomes will always be limited. The review found that studies of social work effectiveness with different types of service users varied both in their number and type. Despite some overall positive findings, the limited scale of research on social work with adults, both in terms of the topics covered and its capacity to produce generalisable results also needs to be addressed. Several explanations have been offered for this situation, of which perhaps the most important from the viewpoint of social work research in settings within Malaysia and other developing countries is the limited funding base for social work research and the comparatively small size of the social work research workforce. The potential to support more social work practitioner research and identify how much input on social work qualifying and post-qualifying programs on developing research skills is a further consideration, but one which is outside the remit of this review. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity of many social work activities that are not suitable to traditional techniques for measuring effectiveness, such as methodologies by which social work effectiveness might be measured.

As much of the research on which this review is based was undertaken in the United States and the United Kingdom, there is a significant priority to improve social work effectiveness research in Malaysia in line with raising issues about the transferability of the results. This could also reflect a combination of methodological preferences and lack of funding but there would appear to be a need to identify why this issue exists. It may be more practicable to identify whether there are studies with different but rigorous research designs that might help add to the evidence base. There is potential to re-analyse existing data sets collected that could be used to explore social work effectiveness in more detail. In addition, the comparative lack of popularity of action research in social work compared with nursing. There could be opportunities to explore if greater methodological variety in social work research might be one means of ensuring that practitioners and service users and carers can play stronger roles in research on social work effectiveness and if greater consensus can be reached about what constitutes a 'desirable' outcome. It is important to conclude that this scoping review does not provide enough evidence on which to make policy decisions, mainly because the existence of studies is not enough to justify decisions without further consideration of their quality. However, this review has highlighted areas that have been extensively researched. Hence, it is hoped that this review will help decide where priorities for undertaking more in-depth reviews and in warranting new research might best be directed and to be supported by the policymakers and practitioners.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express appreciation for the support of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) as the Grant Provider. This review paper is done as part of the research under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme of MOHE. [600-IRMI/FRGS 53 (427/2019)].

6. REFERENCES

- Boutin-Foster, C., Euster, S., Rolon, Y., Motal, A., BeLue, R., Kline, R., & Charlson, M. E., (2017). Social work admission assessment tool for identifying patients in need of comprehensive social work evaluation. *Health & Social Work, 30*(2), 117-125.
- Bride, B. E., Abraham, A. J., Kintzle, S., & Roman, P. M. (2013). Social workers' knowledge and perceptions of effectiveness and acceptability of medication-assisted treatment of substance use disorders, *Social Work in Health Care, 52*(1), 43-58.
- Chan, C., & Holosko, M. J. (2016). A review of information and communication technology-enhanced social work interventions. *Research on Social Work Practice, 26*(1), 88-100.
- Cheetham, J., Fuller, R., McIvor, G., & Petch, A. (2016). *Evaluating social work effectiveness*. Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2019). *Re-visioning social work education: An independent review*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-work-education-review> (accessed 11 August 2021).
- Epstein, W. M (2019). Romantic social work. *Society, 49*(6), 525-533.
- Ernst, J. S., & Smith, C. A. (2012). Assessment in adult protective services: Do multidisciplinary teams make a difference? *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 55*(1), 21-38.
- Gingerich, W. J., & Peterson, L. T. (2013). Effectiveness of solution-focused brief therapy: A systematic qualitative review of controlled outcome studies. *Research on Social Work Practice, 23*(3), 266-283.
- Gorey, K. M., Thyer, B. A., & Pawluck, D. E. (2018). Differential effectiveness of prevalent social work practice models: A meta-analysis. *Social Work, 17*(4), 390-395.
- Kreisberg, N., & Marsh, J. C. (2015). Social work knowledge production and utilisation: An international comparison. *British Journal of Social Work*.
- Milne, A., Sullivan, M. P., Tanner, D., Richards, S., Ray, M., Lloyd, L., Beech, C., & Phillips, J. (2017). *Social work with older people: A vision for the future, 2013*. London, The College of Social Work.
- Moriarty, J., Baginsky, M., & Manthorpe, J. (2015). *Literature review of roles and issues within the social work profession in England*. London, King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit
- Mullen, E. J., & Shuluk, J. (2020). Outcomes of social work intervention in the context of evidence-based practice. *Journal of Social Work, 11*(1), 49-63.
- Peters, M. D. J., Godfrey, C.M., Khalil, H., McInerney, P., & Parker, D. (2015). Guidance for conducting systematic scoping reviews. *International Journal of Evidence-Based Healthcare, 13*(3), 141-146.
- Reid, W. J., & Kenaley, B. D. (2018). Do some interventions work better than others? A review of comparative social work experiments. *Social Work Research, 28*(2), 71-81.
- Romeo, L. (2020). *Chief social worker for adults*. London Department of Health. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/data/file/368485.web_final.pdf (accessed 6 September 2021)
- Rosen, A., Proctor, E. K., & Staudt, M. M. (2019). Social work research and the quest for effective practice. *Social Work Research, 23*(1), 4-14.
- The College of Social Work, Roles and Functions of Social Workers in England (2018). *Advice note*. London, The College of Social Work.