

6. Evaluation of Social Work Intervention: An Early Prelude to Evidence-Based Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This chapter reviews Edward Mullen's two early publications that in hindsight were a prelude to his later engagement in the emergence and development of contemporary evidence-based social work practice. Both books had national impact at the time of publication and later, via the development of evidence-based social work practice, gained transnational relevance. Despite some of the critics of evidence-based practice (EBP) who view EBP as a subsidiary of evidence-based medicine, this chapter explores social work's independent and parallel emergence during the last two decades and its assertion of its right to EBP. It credits Edward Mullen's publications on social work interventions as a major contribution to social work research and practice. It honors Edward Mullen's dedication, consistency, and persistence throughout his career.

In 1972, Edward Mullen, then a professor of social work at the University of Chicago, and James Dumpson published a book that to me served as a forerunner to evidence-based social work practice. The book, titled *Evaluation of Social Intervention*, is a collection of the contributions of 13 intervention studies presented at a national conference on the subject. The conference took place at Fordham University, located in Manhattan, NY. Mullen and Dumpson wrote the introduction and conclusion chapters; the former, a contextual piece that framed all empirical contributions, and the latter, a summary of lessons learned.

Ed Mullen later moved to Columbia University in New York City. James R. Dumpson, an adjunct professor at Fordham and past president of the Council on Social Work Education, served as senior consultant to New York

Community Trust. I had the pleasure of meeting James Dumpson before his passing. The last time I saw him was late one night, at the corner of 125th and Lexington in Manhattan, where Ed and I accompanied this lovely man to catch a cab. The question was whether he was going to take a yellow or black cab. He took a cab; however, I am not going to disclose the choice.

So how were these 13 contributions selected? The answer to this question indicates why this book was a forerunner to evidence-based social work practice. The selection criteria for inclusion of empirical contributions were: "the study is a relevant and major evaluation of the effects of social work intervention; the study used an experimental research design; and, the study has potential for contributing to the redesign of social work programs and curricula" (Mullen & Dumpson, 1972, p. vii). Effect measurement and experimental research design were essential components.

Let's put the publication of this book in a historical perspective relative to evidence-based medicine: Archie Cochrane's pivotal book, *Effectiveness and Efficiency: Random Reflections on Health Services*, was also published in 1972 and the first Cochrane Center (in Oxford) was established in October 1992 (two decades after Cochrane's book). *Evidence-Based Medicine: How to Practice and Teach EBM*, the publication in which David Sackett, W. Scott Richardson, William Rosenberg, and R. Brian Haynes introduced the concept of evidence-based medicine as a process, was published in 1997. So perhaps social work was not so much behind medicine in observing the need to base its practices on strong scientific evidence. In fact, these were two contemporary, parallel, and emerging insights and ideas—each on one side of the Atlantic, unknown or not organically connected to each other—that would later be associated with medicine and social work. Mullen and Dumpson were not aware of Cochrane's work (E. J. Mullen, personal communication, December 8, 2014), and Cochrane seems not to have been aware of the Mullen and Dumpson book. Interestingly, referring to Cochrane's work, Ed Mullen observed in 2014 in an initial version of his Bolzano conference keynote speech:

We came to similar conclusions regarding the failure of these RCTs to demonstrate social work intervention effectiveness. It is of interest that Cochrane was not aware of either our review or of all but one of the 15 social work RCTs. In a section of his 1972 book dealing with social work he expresses concern that "the Social Services seem to be evolving in exactly the same unfortunate way as medicine by suggesting that wherever there is a social 'need' a social worker must be appointed whether or not there is any evidence that the social worker can alter the natural history of the social problem." He goes on to say that the situation with social work is even more distressing than in medicine because social workers seem to be "antagonistic to evaluation." (E. J. Mullen, personal communication, December 8, 2014)

Mullen and Dumpson's (1972) book and the Cochrane (1972) book would become beacons for the development of a new professional culture, a term coined by Soydan and Palinkas (2014).

In their introductory chapter, Mullen and Dumpson (1972) questioned whether social work was on the wrong track. This question was prompted by the debated issue of the era, namely observations of the lack of impact of social work interventions, and was substantiated by all 13 experiments reported in the book. The main focus of the Fordham conference and the book was the effectiveness of social work interventions.

At the time the book was published, again from a historical perspective, Mullen and Dumpson (1972) observed: "The effectiveness of professional social work interventions has been a matter of concern for at least forty years" (p. 2). This represents an 80-year perspective, given the book was published more than 40 years ago. Mullen and Dumpson continued: "As long ago as 1931 Richard C. Cabot, in his presidential address to the National Conference on Social Work, urged the profession to begin assessing the results of its programs" (p. 2).

Richard Clarke Cabot (1868–1939), an American physician, believed that economic, social, family, and psychological factors underpinned many of the conditions exhibited by patients. He advocated that social workers should

work together with doctors, the former taking care of social health and the latter physiological health. Later Cabot developed and financed perhaps one of the most famous field trials in the history of social work profession, the Cambridge–Somerville Youth Study, which also was one of first intervention studies of the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. The intervention theory of the Cambridge–Somerville Youth Study was that delinquent and potentially delinquent youths would become productive citizens if supported by friendly and engaged adults who could help them receive appropriate community services (by assuming a kind of case-management role). A randomized controlled study design was constructed by randomly assigning 325 boys between 6 and 10 years old to a treatment group, and an equal number of boys, matched with the treatment group on a large number of variables, to a control group. The program continued for eight years (1937–1945). So what was the outcome of the treatment?

Powers and Witmer (1951) reported results of the study: During the course of the treatment period, 96 boys in the experiment group had court appearances for 264 offenses. In the control group, 92 boys had court appearances for 218 offences. The lack of statistically significant differences between experiment and control groups was consistent across other outcome measures. The researchers concluded that treatment did not reduce the incidence of delinquency as determined by judicial involvement. Joan McCord, later a founding member of the Campbell Collaboration, conducted a 30-year follow-up study. About 95% of the sample was tracked down through public records. McCord concluded in 1978 that the treatment program had no effect on juvenile or adult arrest rates (Sayre-McCord, 2007). There were no differences between the groups in terms of serious crimes committed and age at first commission of a serious crime. A larger proportion of the experiment group committed additional crime compared to the control group.

Mullen and Dumpson also observed similar evidence pertaining to the ineffectiveness of psychotherapy. They noted that Eysenck concluded in 1952, a year after the results of the Cambridge–Somerville study were published:

"There thus appears to be an inverse correlation between recovery and psychotherapy; the more psychotherapy, the smaller the recovery rate" (Mullen & Dumpson, 1972, p. 3). Eysenck based this conclusion on a review of 24 studies comparing psychoanalytic treatment to either custodial care or the care of a general physician. In addition, Levitt reported in 1957 that a review of 35 studies of children diagnosed as neurotic "failed to support the view that psychotherapy with 'neurotic' children is effective" (Mullen & Dumpson, 1972, p. 3). These reports, especially that of Eysenck, set off "violent and stormy reactions" (Mullen & Dumpson, 1972, p. 3).

Moving from psychotherapy to social work, Mullen and Dumpson observed that similar empirical results had emerged regarding social work counseling services. The Russell Sage Foundation published a report in 1965 titled *Girls at Vocational High: An Experiment in Social Work Intervention*. This study reported results of a 4-year experiment with girls whose behavior and performance predicted potential delinquency at New York City Vocational High School. Counseling services were provided to 189 girls in the experiment group, whereas 192 girls in the control group did not receive these services. Outcome variables included school completion, academic performance, school-related behavior, out-of-school behavior, and self-reported outcomes by the participants. Investigators reported: "With respect to all of the measures we have used to examine effects of the treatment program, only a minimal effect can be found" (Mullen & Dumpson, 1972, p. 4). This minimal effect or difference between the experiment and control groups was not statistically significant. The report generated controversy regarding the effectiveness of traditional social work services.

Another study, *The Chemung County Evaluation of Casework Service to Dependent Multiproblem Families*, in the 1960s, highlighted a similar problem (Brown, 1968). This study evaluated the effects of intensive social casework on 50 multiproblem families in comparison to a control group of multiproblem families who received care as usual provided by public assistance services during 31 months. The study showed that although

families in the experiment group functioned slightly better, the difference compared to control group families was not statistically significant.

With this backdrop of serious concerns about the effectiveness of interventions in the social work community of researchers and practitioners, the Fordham conference was arranged and attended by representatives of more than 125 universities and agencies. Sixteen intervention studies were reviewed at the conference. Nine studies evaluated the casework method as a primary intervention; two studies evaluated casework and group methods; three studies assessed casework, group work, and community organization; one study examined a combination of casework and nursing; and one study assessed a team approach.

Outcomes of all studies reported at the conference were consistently inconclusive, and researchers were rarely able to demonstrate that an intervention program had even modest success in achieving its main goals. Mullen and Dumpson (1972) concluded:

Suggestions have been offered for the reorganization and development of social work practice and education, and the general directions are now clear. Social work must give priority to tackling what has been defined as the macro and mezzosystems, and the human needs and problems they generate. Basic to achievement of this goal is development of strategies for effecting social policy development on the macro and mezzosystem levels. The broad social problems of poverty, racism, and general social injustice must be addressed; but it is clearly evident that these problems cannot be properly addressed simply by interventions directed toward individuals experiencing these problems. The studies reviewed in this book clearly attest to the futility of attempting to resolve our major social problems through microsystem interventions. (p. 252)

They added: "This is not to suggest that microsystem problems should not be the concern of social work" (p. 252). However, contrary to Mullen and Dumpson's relative pessimism about the effectiveness of individual-level interventions, this concern would not be realized and instead many very effective interventions would be developed in the decades to come.

Furthermore, Mullen and Dumpson recommended that the profession pay attention to additional factors that are very similar to those prescribed by the modern theory of evidence-based social work practice: to draw on knowledge and skills from a variety of professions and disciplines (evidence-based practice prescribes tracking down the best available evidence to address an identified problem) and address the need for feedback, which is the last step in modern evidence-based practice, that is, evaluating outcomes of the implementation of an intervention. Finally, Mullen and Dumpson (1972) concluded: "We are struck with the observation that what was being observed in many of the reviewed evaluations was the dysfunctional nature of social agencies" (p. 253).

This observation may have led Mullen and Dumpson, together with Richard First of Indiana University's School of Social Service, to undertake a study exploring the state of education for effective social services administration practices. Study outcomes were reported in a book under the auspices of the Council on Social Work Education, *Toward Education for Effective Social Welfare Administrative Practice* (Dumpson, Mullen, & First, 1978). The empirical data were collected via a nationwide mail survey of all graduate schools of social work accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. The trio reported the following findings:

- A lack of systematic models for organizing accumulated knowledge on social welfare administrative practices.
- Disagreement and a certain degree of confusion regarding the most appropriate structural organization of social welfare administrative practice education.
- A discrepancy between the number of social workers in administrative positions (50%) or performing administrative functions (91%; this term was undefined) compared to rate of students enrolling in an administrative specialization (4%).

Further, the trio reported four unmet needs that should be addressed:

1. A need to increase the number of students enrolled in programs designed to equip graduates to function responsibly and effectively in administrative practice at the middle and top levels of administration, with priority given to the public social welfare system.
2. An urgent need to organize knowledge around the concept of effectiveness and efficiency in the context of the following question: What qualities increase or decrease the probability of effective and efficient administrative practice?
3. An urgent need to organize continuing education programs in social welfare administration for graduates of schools of social work.
4. "A need to test the relevance of efficacy of the field instruction models currently being used for direct social service delivery, as preparation for administrative practice" (Dumpson et al., 1978, p. 35).

It would take approximately 35 years before Ed Mullen (this time with Joseph Skuluk, then at the Social Work Leadership Institute of the New York Academy of Medicine) returned to the same issue that was the subject of the 1972 book: the effectiveness of social work interventions. He certainly maintained this issue as a main interest of his work and visited it from time to time, but his coauthored 2011 article in *Journal of Social Work* was a major literature review and a seminal publication.

In this article, Mullen and Shuluk (2011) concluded:

There is now a large body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of a wide range of social work interventions with a wide range of social problems and populations. It is now reasonable to conclude that approximately two-thirds of clients served by social workers benefit in measurable ways. These positive outcomes remain, even after controlling for publication and investigator bias, which, nevertheless, have been shown to inflate positive outcomes. Because an increasing number of studies have contrasted competing, alternative, credible interventions using some form of comparison group design, evidence is beginning

to become available about the relative efficacy of alternative interventions for specific problems and populations. (p. 60)

Further, they observed:

We think that findings reviewed in this article are sufficiently encouraging to recommend that promising social work interventions with specific social problems and specific populations be more carefully studied with particular attention to questions of cost-effectiveness. Using comparative effectiveness strategies, specification of differential effectiveness should now be the focus so as to answer questions such as: what intervention, under what circumstances, for what problem, under what conditions, in what population has what effect and at what cost? (Mullen & Shuluk, 2011, pp. 60–61)

Four decades is a long time, and as Ed Mullen's efforts have demonstrated, the progress accomplished by social work research since the publication of his 1972 book is stunning.

Nonetheless, controversies regarding evidence of effectiveness remain ongoing. In 2011, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare published an official report in Swedish; its title can be translated as *Debate on the Dodo Bird: Does the Treatment Method Play a Role in Client Work?* This article, written by Mullen, Shuluk, and Soydan, integrated empirical data from Mullen and Shuluk's 2011 literature review with the famous dodo debate. In 1936, American psychologist Saul Rosenzweig published an article (three and a half pages) arguing that psychotherapeutic theories worked because of common factors such as the alliance between therapist and patient, and not because of differences in specific techniques and methods of each psychotherapeutic theory. This proposition was termed the dodo bird verdict based on a tale in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. According to the story, a dodo bird is worried that some fellow birds got their plumage wet at the lake, so it organizes a running competition around the lake to dry them. The birds run and arrive to the finish line one after another, at which point they ask who won the race. The dodo bird concludes that everyone has won

and should get a prize. In other words, because all psychotherapeutic interventions work, they all should get a prize or recognition.

Outlined in controversial articles in a Swedish social work journal, Mullen, Shuluk, and Soydan's conclusion was criticized with reference to literature on psychotherapeutic interventions models. However, the authors argued that they limited their study to social work interventions. They wrote:

We conclude that variables common to all social work interventions may explain the generally positive outcomes found in recent reviews of social work outcomes, but that such common factors seem to play a lesser role than in allied psychotherapeutic interventions. (Mullen, Shuluk, & Soydan, 2012, p. 47)

The last three decades have been the era of evidence-based medicine, evidence-based practice, and evidence-based policy. The development of systematic research reviews took off very strongly beginning in the mid-1990s, fueled by an increasing awareness among professionals and decision makers, and subsequently the general public, of the importance of high-quality evidence in professional practice and policy making. The inception and advances of the Cochrane Collaboration¹ in the health-related sciences and practices by the mid-1990s and the Campbell Collaboration² in the behavioral, social, and educational sciences from early 2000 established the science and technology of systematic research reviews and meta-analyses. Later, the dissemination, translation, and implementation of high-quality evidence came to the forefront and triggered innovations such as the Guidelines International Network,³ which promotes excellence in creating high-quality clinical practice guidelines that foster safe and effective patient care, and many high-quality clearinghouses dedicated to making high-quality evidence available to end users. In these and other relevant contexts, the concept of evidence has taken a crucial and central role. Although

1 See <http://www.cochrane.org>

2 See <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>

3 See <http://www.g-i-n.net>

relatively many scholars have questioned the nature of evidence as informed by randomized controlled studies and embraced by the Cochrane and Campbell collaborations as the gold standard of science, few if any brought as holistic and constructive a critique of the concept as Ed Mullen.

The opportunity presented itself when he was invited to address the Fourth European Conference for Social Work Research in Bolzano, Italy, in April 2014. His keynote speech, titled "The Idea of Evidence in Evidence-Based Policy and Practice," has been revised for publication (Mullen, 2015). Drawing on a broad array of disciplines such as epistemology, philosophy of science, law, and evidence science, Mullen proposed modification of the concept of evidence in the context of EBP. The abstract of the article summarized Mullen's radical, provocative, and very constructive approach to the idea of evidence:

I propose that for EBP effectiveness questions: (1) to be considered 'relevant evidence' an explanatory connection between an intervention and an outcome must be established rather than a mere association; (2) the EBP definition of 'best available evidence' should include total available evidence (rather than a subset) about effectiveness, causal roles (i.e., mechanisms), and support factors and be inclusive of high-quality experimental and observational studies as well as high-quality mechanistic reasoning; (3) the familiar five-step EBP process should be expanded to include formulation of warranted, evidence-based arguments and that evidence appraisal be guided by three high level criteria of *relevance*, *credibility*, and *strength* rather than rigid evidence hierarchies; (4) comparative effectiveness research strategies, especially pragmatic controlled studies, hold promise for providing relevant and actionable evidence needed for policy and practice decision-making and successful implementation. (p. 1)

Finally, let's wrap up this chapter with a few closing remarks. I have tried to track a fraction of Edward Joseph Mullen's scholarly work, particularly pertaining to the important role of social work interventions in social work practice and related evidence of their effectiveness. My reading of these publications revealed a few characteristics of his work:

- His publications on social work interventions represent a major contribution to the advancement of research on social work practice and the profession to the benefit of our clients.
- His tireless dedication to evidence-based social work practice has been incredibly productive.
- His consistency and persistence throughout his scholarly career is admirable.
- His civil courage to engage in scientific controversies is honorable.

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