The perceptions of social workers about barriers to implementing Evidence-Based Practice in School Social Work settings in two Arab countries

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Abstract

School social work practitioners provide important social services in one of the most critical settings in social work. The role requires practitioners to be fully aware of ongoing changes and updates within the profession, as it relates to problems and phenomena in a school community. At the beginning of the current millennium, evidence-based social work practice emerged. It emphasized the importance of preparing practitioners to make appropriate decisions for professional interventions with clients. The purpose of the study reported was to identify the social workers' perceptions of barriers to implementing evidence-based practice (EBP) in school of social work settings in two Arab countries. In their descriptive cross-sectional study, the author examined a survey sample of 80 Social Workers in school social work settings in Egypt and Qatar. Findings from this study indicated to barriers within four main categories: Practitioners; organizational; clients; and the nature of EBP process. Additionally, the author suggests some strategies for overcoming the identified barriers.

KEYWORDS: Evidence-Based Practice – School Social Work Settings - Arab countries

Introduction:

School Social Work is a particular branch of the social work profession that attempts to assist all students as they move through the formal education system. This often involves the use of treatments to assist all students to achieve social and emotional adjustment. It also provides them and their families with additional support services. (Franklin, Gerlach, & Chanmugam, 2008). Social work practice in school settings is one of the oldest areas of professional practice within social work .It firstly began in the United States between 1906 and 1907. (Allen-Meares, 2013). It is the second most saturated social work setting, maintaining the highest number of social workers next to substance abuse and mental health service settings. Social workers are present in 44% forty-four percent of all school in districts across the United States. (Allen-Meares, 2006). School social work is also an international profession which is practiced in many countries all over the world.

Thone philosophy of school social work, which does not necessarily reflect reality, centers on the right of every student in formal education environments. They have the right to access to the guidance of a social worker, whether the student takes full advantage of the service or not (Franklin, C., Gerlach, B., & Chanmugam, A.

2008). The school social worker's role is to support the strengths of the student and their family while addressing the often complex needs of each individual student. These interventions require the skill and expertise of experienced social workers and often involves the use of community support services, in order to provide truly holistic care.

There are many definitions of EBP, each with a different emphasis. Most frequently EBP has been defined as the "Conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best available evidence in making decisions about the care of clients" and integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research" (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996).

Gibbs (2003) defined evidence-based practice as ''Placing the client's benefits first, evidence-based practitioners adopt a process of lifelong learning that involves continually posing specific questions of direct practical importance to clients, searching objectively and efficiently for the current best evidence relative to each question, and taking appropriate action guided by evidence''(P6).

The concept of evidence-based practice (EBP) has become a common buzzword in the last few years. It is used as a reference can across a range of social science disciplines such as medicine, psychiatry, psychology, social work, marital and family therapy, chiropractic, and nursing among others. (Thyer, 2004.p167).

There has been increasing emphasis on the use of evidence-based practices (EBP) and evidence-based interventions (EBI) in all social work settings, particularly in previous two decades. (Bellamy, Bledsoe, & Traube, 2006,p89).

In addition, EBP practice and education in social work has moved from the United States to many other countries, including Canada, Australia, China, Denmark, England, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and Germany. It also moved to some Arab countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. (Iovu & Runcan, 2012; Zedan, Nasr, & Helal, 2016; Helal, 2017). Several studies have been conducted on evidence-based social work practice in the Arab world but two studies, in particular, have had a significant impact on the practice of EBP today. The first of these was Majida Muhammad Al-Najim's (2009) article about EBP detailing the evolution of this process and how it moved to the social work profession. In addition, she has outlined its importance in increasing the effectiveness of social work

practice. Most relevantly, the study looked at the application of EBP within the context of Arab societies and identified a number of obstacles to its implementation. These obstacles include a lack of research available in Arabic as well as a lack of electronic publications in the area more generally (Al-Najim, 2009). The second study was by Helal (2014) which aimed to identify the most effective models for reducing the use of narcotic drugs and evaluating the model's effectiveness in preventing relapse, through the use of EBP. The results of this study have found that the Relapse Prevention Model based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy was the most effective intervention. After the emergence of these findings, many more studies on evidence-based practice emerged in the Arab world (Helal, 2014).

Literature Review:

Social work practitioners face many barriers when they attempt to use evidence-based practice in professional interventions with clients. Several studies have investigated these barriers that prevent the implementation of EBP in social work and offer insights into possible solutions. Lee (2015) explained that EBP barriers fall into four main categories. These categories are characteristics of the adaptor, the organization, the innovation, and the communication. Newman, Papadopoulos, & Sigsworth, (1998) reported that there are two main categories of barriers to EBP implementation. The first one is the Organizational Barriers such as EBP being a low management priority. The second is the difficulties within the professional team, difficulties in accessing evidence and a lack of resource constraints and Cultural Barriers. These barriers are a potential lack of motivation to change practice and an inhibition on the questioning of standard practice. Thyer (2004) explained that the slow production of research, due to limited funding and time-consuming procedures, may not be able to keep up with the ongoing changes in agency practice. For practitioners that do have access to recently published journals, the lag time between generations of research findings and publications results in evidence can reach several years and is not necessarily useful for current practice (Thyer, 2004).

Manuel, Mullen, Fang, Bellamy, & Bledsoe (2009) identified EBP barriers as including: lack of knowledge, skills, training, supervision, or monitoring around EBP implementation. The lack of resources like time, access, or funding overburdened staff. The lack of sufficient evidence and lack of proper fit or application . Another

study identified additional barriers including resistance from the school board and/or parents and a lack of staff support for the process (Cawood, 2010). Lundgren et al., (2012) added that there may also be client resistance and non-participation, staff turnover, incomplete cultural/language accomodation. The complexity of a model's requirements, and difficulty in building relations and communicating with collaborators.

Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb (2012) found additional barriers include the resistance of agency culture and/or a negative or indifferent attitude toward EBP, possibly due to a poor understanding of the concept (Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb, 2012). Related to the previous study Udo, Forsman, Jensfelt, & Flink (2018) looked at research use and evidence-based practice among Swedish medical social workers. They found that difficulty in implementing EBP may be due to the lack of opportunities for recurrent, structured discussions involving the exchange of knowledge between colleagues. This makes it difficult to transform individual knowledge into more general or agency-wide knowledge.

Despite the various studies on evidence-based practice in social work in America and Europe, the scope of its use in school social work settings in the Arab world is still low. There is a need for more research concerning EBP application within that context, with a particular focus on identifying barriers to its application from the perspective of school social work practitioners. Therefore, this research was conducted with the aim to fill that apparent gap and to investigate the barriers and facilitators of EBP, from the point of view of school social workers in two Arab countries. The final findings of this study will support school social work organizations in Egypt and Qatar in their development and facilitation of a more EBP.

Objectives:

The objectives of this study were to:

(1) Identify perceived barriers towards the implementation of EBP from the perspective of the Egyptian and the Qatari social workers in school social work settings.

(2) Identify possible corrective actions. These actions are conducive for the successful implementation of EBP for working with students in both countries.

Hypotheses:

H1- There is statistically significant differences between Egyptian and Qatari social workers for the EBP Barriers related to practitioners.

H2- There is statistically significant differences between Egyptian and Qatari social workers for the EBP Barriers related to schools.

H3- There is statistically significant differences between Egyptian and Qatari social workers for the EBP Barriers related to students.

H4- There is statistically significant differences between the Egyptian and Qatari social workers for the Barriers due to the nature of EBP process.

Method Study Design:

The current research is a part of a cross-sectional study designed to assess social workers' perceptions of barriers to implementing EBP in school social work settings. The study population included (80) selected school social workers who were given questionnaires. There were (44) school social workers from Egypt and (36) from Qatar. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The data was collected during the year 2021.

Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations:

The author of this study created and administered a survey with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study. He also explained the potential confidentiality issues and informed consent to the respondents. Approval was obtained from each of the social workers. All participants were then asked to fill in this letter with the study title, nature and a participant's name. The data collection process continued for an about 60 days.

Study Measures:

The measures used in this study were part of a survey designed to measure perceived barriers to implementing EBP in school social work settings in Egypt and Qatar. It is also facilitate strategies to assist in the process. The survey consisted of seventy-four items and took approximately 10 to 20 minutes to complete. Seventy items were used to examine perceptions of barriers. Four items were used to establish relevant demographics such as gender, age, education level, and years of experience.

To capture the perceptions of barriers, 20 items were developed to assess the EBP barriers related to practitioners. 10 items were developed to assess the EBP barriers related to schools. 10 items were developed to assess the EBP barriers related to students. 10 items were developed. to assess the EBP barriers related to the nature of the EBP process. 20 items were developed to assess strategies to facilitate the implementation of EBP.

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Response options were presented on a three-point Likert-type scale assessing agreement with the stem: 1 = disagree. 2 = somewhat agree. 3 = agree. Scores were recorded to clarify the responses to these questions to better reflect participants' perceptions. The final instrument was reviewed for content validity by ten social work professors with expertise in this area in order to assure that the survey content asked the appropriate questions of the potential research participants. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate the internal consistency of the measurement scale. From the statistical analysis, it can be concluded that the instrument was reliable as a score of 0.911 was obtained for the items.

Data Analysis:

Data analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows 20.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). Descriptive statistical techniques were applied to clarify demographic characteristics of the study sample. Such techniques included the calculation of the frequencies and percentages (mean, median and standard deviation) for each Likert-scale item. Lastly, T-tests and The Spearman-Brown Prediction Formula, Split-Half Reliability equation were performed and Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the study tools and measure the strength of the tools' consistency.

Table (1) Demographic characteristics of the participants (n = 80)						
Demographic	**Egyptian Social Workers**		**Qatari Social Workers**		**Total**	
	no	**%**	**no**	**%**	**no**	**%**
Gender						
Male	27	61.4	20	55.6	47	58.8
Female	17	38.6	16	44.4	33	41.2
Age						
Mean	47.27		42.78		45.25	
SD	0.937		0.959		0.968	
Education						
BSW of Social work	27	61.4	24	66.7	51	63.8
BSW OF Arts Department of Sociology	4	9.1	3	8.3	7	8.8
MSW	3	6.8	3	8.3	6	7.5
Diploma (s)	10	22.7	6	16.7	16	20
Years of experience						
Mean	7.77		13.42		12.28	
SD	0.697		1.025		1.024	
Total	44		100		36	

Table 1 displays the demographic information of participants. The study participants were predominately (58.8 percent) male. The average age was 45.25 years old with a range from 20 to 64 years old. A majority of participants reported a Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) as their highest level of education (63.8 percent). Only 4 respondents (8.8 percent) reported having a BSW of Arts Department of Sociology. Three study participants (7.5 percent) reported having a Master's in Social Work (MSW). Ten study participants (20 percent) reported having a Diploma in Social Work. The majority of respondents (98.6 percent) had more than two years of experience in social work practice (M 12.28, SD 1.025).

Barriers Identified by Social Workers:

Table2: Barriers to EBP Implementation in school in Egypt and Qatar (n = 80)						
EBP Barriers	**Country**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Rank**	**T- Test (df)**	**P-value**
EBP Barriers related to practitioners	**Egypt**	2.46	0.692	2	4.759(78)	< 0.05 **
	Qatar	1.79	0.535	1		
EBP Barriers related to schools	**Egypt**	2.71	0.717	1	6.620 (78)	< 0.05 **
	Qatar	1.70	0.629	2		
EBP Barriers related to students	**Egypt**	2.37	0.610	3	5.598 (78)	< 0.05 **
	Qatar	1.60	0.529	3		
Barriers due to the nature of EBP process	**Egypt**	2.35	0.765	4	4.781 (78)	< 0.05 **
	Qatar	1.58	0.612	3		

** Significant at 0.05.

In order to establish social workers' views on barriers to EBP implementation related to practitioners, respondents were asked to select from a list of barriers. The barriers were present in their practice setting. **Table 2** shows Egyptian and Qatari Social Workers' perceptions barriers to implementing EBP in school social work settings in Egypt and Qatar. The total barriers in using EBP in working with students were as follows. The top one barrier identified from the point of view of the Egyptian participants were (EBP Barriers related to Schools) (89 %) (Average = 2.71, SD = 0.717). T, while the top one barrier identified from the point of view of the Qatari participants were (EBP barriers related to practitioners) (60 %) (Average = 1.79, SD =0.535). The results of the study also showed the top fourth or the last barrier identified from the point of view of the Egyptian participants was ere (EBP barriers related to the nature of EBP process) (78.3 %) (average = 2.35, SD =0.765). While the top

fourth or last barrier identified from the point of view of the Qatari participants was ere a tie between (EBP Barriers related to student and EBP barriers related to the nature of EBP process) (53.00 %) ("average = 1.60, 1.58, SD =0.529, 0.610).

Table 2 reveals that there are statistically significant differences between Egyptian and Qatari social workers for the EBP barriers related to practitioners (T= 4.759, df=78, p-value <0.05), EBP barriers related to schools (T= 6.620, df=78, p-value <0.05), EBP barriers related to students(T=5.598, df=78, p-value <0.05)and the barriers due to the nature of EBP process (T=4.791, df=78, p-value <0.05). The scores of all four barriers are higher in the Egyptian social workers than the Qatari social works scores.

The results of this study indicate that there are many barriers in using EBP in Arab countries, particularly in Egypt and Qatar. There are four primary barriers worth noting as a result of this study: EBP barriers related to practitioners, EBP barriers related to schools, EBP barriers related to students, and barriers related to the nature of the EBP process itself (see Table 2).

Discussion:

The most frequently mentioned barriers to EBP implementation in Egypt and Qatar are those related to practitioners. As mentioned above, Egyptian social workers identified a lack of practitioner's income and increases in the workload are major factors preventing the implementation of EBP at school. As well as, a lack of practitioner's numbers within the schools, Practitioners feels unable to implement EBP in the school served as barriers. Furthermore, some practitioners preferred to work with traditional models of therapeutic interventions with clients and were therefore resistant to new EBP's. Some practitioner's inability to work with computers during EBP implementation and insufficient time at work to apply EBP was also cited as barriers. It was rated as the top barrier in this study, which is consistent with other studies conducted in similar social work settings (Manuel, Mullen, Fang, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2009; Cawood 2010; Mel Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb 2012).

The study confirmed that the following barriers to the implementation of EBPs in Egyptian schools. Firstly, the large amount of administrative work those social workers had to complete daily. Secondly the lack of preparation of social workers in schools, and the limited time those practitioners were allotted. Moreover, although the number of social workers in Qatar was appropriate, the study found that it was more difficult for them to engage in EBPs also.

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This study found that some Egyptian practitioners prefer to work with traditional models of therapeutic interventions with students. They had used traditional styles, such as social casework. When working with students for a long time, were resistant to the newer models rooted in EBP's. This point reflected similar results from other studies that investigated barriers to EBP implementation (Ahmed, S. G). This resistance may be due to the nature of social work education in Egypt. Students are only taught to use traditional treatment models of client intervention, such as social casework, social group work and community organization. The results of the study showed that Qatari practitioners tend to use modern therapeutic models practice in professional interventions with the student.

The study also identified barriers to EBP implementation in Qatar. As mentioned above, Qatari social workers identified a lack of practitioner's experience and an inability of practitioners to limitations of formulates questions skills to apply EBP as major barriers. A practitioner's inability to work with a computer, a lack of continuing education programs. Also the lack of authority for practitioners to make changes in practice was also listed as prominent barriers. These findings are consistent with other studies of its kind (Newman, Papadopoulos, & Sigsworth, 1998; Thyer 2004; Manuel, Mullen, Fang, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2009; Cawood 2010; Lee 2015; and Lundren et al., 2012).

The results of the study confirmed that both Egyptian and Qatari social workers need to improve their research skills. One of the barriers in using EBPs is the lack of proper scientific research skills, as well as insufficient enrollment in continuing education programs.

Additionally, the study findings showed that school-related barriers were lack of clarity of the social worker's role within the team, limited access to EBP databases or limited access to full-text journal articles were listed as some of the most notable. Additionally, and a lack of school awareness of the importance of EBP, lack of encouragement for the use of EBP, negative attitudes toward the use of EBP or a lack of support from management to implement EBP were also seen as major barriers. This is supported by studies conducted previously (Newman, Papadopoulos, & Sigsworth, 1998; Thyer 2004; Manuel, Mullen, Fang, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2009; Mel Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb 2012; Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb 2015; and Lee 2015). These results confirm that overall there is little support or encouragement from the schools for practitioners to apply these types

of interventions in their practice with students. In Qatar, the school administration is often resistant to use EBPs with students and is not convinced of its importance. Similar findings were shown in the study conducted by Canfield (2014) which revealed EBP barriers related to cultural competency, embarrassment/resistance, school administration, student compliance and organization policies. Furthermore, Bina, Barak, Posmontier, Glasser, and Cinamon (2018) discussed barriers preventing EBP implementation as being related to organizational culture.

This study also found that there are some barriers to implementing EBP in school social work settings which relate to the students. These barriers included the students' disability to make a decision regarding in his or her own problem, the student is not convinced of needing an EBP Intervention and a lack of a student culture which prevents the implementation of EBP. Additionally, the diversity of student personalities and the nature of the relationship between the student and the practitioner can also act as barriers to implementation. Findings of the current study were generally consistent with the previously reported research (Lee 2015; and Lundren et al., 2012).

Another important finding of this study was that there were some barriers related to the nature of the EBP implementation process itself, particularly in Egypt and Qatar. For instance, a lack of Arabic scientific references regarding this type of practice, lack of journalistic interest in the topic, lack of access to appropriate databases or a lack of research conducted in an Arab society served as major barriers. Additionally, social workers feel that the results may not be generalizable to their client's personalities or problem. The newness/modernity of the EBP trend, a lack of systematic reviews within the Arabic society and the burden some cost of implementation all serve as notable barriers. Another barrier to the use of EBPs in the Arab world, in general, is the scarcity of Arabic books that are interested in EBP in social work. In fact, there is only one Arabic book focusing on EBP titled: Evidence-Based Practice with individuals and family (Zeidan et al., 2016).

Participants also indicated that the lack of studies that are concerned with EBPs is a major barrier. This confirms that social workers do not care about research. In fact, there are many scientific studies and MSW, Ph.D. dissertation conducted in the Arab environment concerned with using the evidence-based practice in

social work. (For more access to these studies you can refer to Ahmed T. Helal article 2017 at Encyclopedia of Social Work).

Finally there are systemic barriers that have led to a dearth of Arabic author researching EBPs. There are some studies available in Arabic about EBPs. However, funding is limited for researchers doing work in EBPs; there is no systematic database of EBPs being used in Arabic-speaking countries. EBPs are not typically covered in social work curriculum. Our present research is an attempt to begin to build a foundation of research in EBPs for the Arabic-speaking world.

Implications:

The results obtained from this study have led to the following recommendations:

- The results of the study indicated the importance of incorporating the most up-to-date information on EBP into the social work curriculum at schools of social work in Egypt and Qatar.
- The results of this study indicated to the need to establish partnerships and alliances between organizations and universities in Egypt and Qatar, in order to provide easy access to EBP databases and scientific journals. This will ensure that the best available evidence is available to use when considering potential practices with students.
- The results of the study also showed the need to hold training courses, workshops and conferences for both students and social workers regarding the use of evidence-based practice in various social work settings. Particular attention should be paid to students in the school social work setting, helping to prepare them as social work practitioners who are confident in their use of EBP.
- The results of this study also confirmed the need to provide appropriate financial support for the application of these kinds of practices.

Limitations:

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, this study relied on the perceptions of a limited sample of school social workers at some schools in Egypt and Qatar. Future samples from different geographical regions may provide more robust results. Secondly, the study is limited with the exploration; it would be more valuable if the study went with predictive purposes. Additionally, the questionnaire was self-reported and did not capture the observed practices in respondent's agencies related to EBP implementation. Because the surveys were self-reported, participants may have given consistently high or low ratings. These may have biased results and served as sources of error and affect variance.

Conclusion:

School social workers in Egypt and Qatar face four main barriers when trying to implement EBP in schools. Social work practitioners in the sample of this study in Egypt and Qatar identified practitioners, clients, organizations and the nature of the EBP process itself as the sources of process barriers to the implementation of EBP in school social work settings. Findings from this study may provide a base for research into how to effectively implement EBP in different clinical settings in different Arab countries. These findings should serve as a starting point in providing a method to conceptualize EBP in school settings. However, further research is needed to enhance the impact of evidence-based practice in school social work settings in the Arab world. This study attempts to highlight the barriers in using evidence-based practice in Egypt and Qatar. I recommend that social workers should pay attention to recent research related to EBPs in the school social work settings and urge school authorities to increase their commitment to providing research evidence. This commitment may support professional practices of social service with students. Finally, there is a dire need to conduct regular continuing education programs in both countries concerned with the use of evidence-based practice with students.

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