

Episode 21 - Dr. Denise Bronson: Doing Evidence-Based Social Work Practice

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcasts you can now rate and write a review of each episode of living proof to rate or write a review of a podcast. Just go to our Web site at [WWW dot social work dot buffalo dot edu](http://WWW.socialwork.buffalo.edu) forward slash podcast and click on the. Create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. And this episode of Living Proof. Denise Bronson discusses evidence based social work practice as both a philosophy of practice and an approach to practice. Dr. Bronson is an associate professor of social work at the College of Social Work at the Ohio State University where she teaches evidence based practice practice and program evaluation. Child welfare and international social work focusing on Poland. Professor Bronson's research interests include services to families and children. Child Protective Services and systematic reviews and meta analysis for evidence based practice. Professor Bronson is the author of over 50 articles and book chapters and serves as a reviewer for multiple journals and editorial board. She also was a Fulbright senior lecturer in Krakow Poland in 2008.

[00:01:58] Today Professor Bronson discusses the steps in the evidence based practice process and the importance of practitioner research for collaboration and solving practice and policy problems. Howard Doueck professor and associate dean for faculty and project development at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Dr. Bronson by telephone good morning and welcome to Denise Bronson who will be chatting with us today about evidence based practice in Applied Social work settings. Good morning Denise. Good morning. Associate professor at the Ohio State University College of Social Work thank you for joining us. You're welcome. So tell us what exactly is evidence based practice. Well there are many definitions but I think it's safe to go with the one that's been most commonly adopted and that has to do with the integration of best research evidence together with clinical expertise or practice wisdom and client value. It's I think both the philosophy and practice as well as a system and a way of approaching practice in approaching research so it has two components that I think are really crucial to engaging in evidence based practice. How is evidence based practice different from what is generally referred to as social work practice. When I think about my early days in practice if I was faced with a clinical problem that I wasn't sure how to address my strategy was generally one of going to a supervisor or other colleagues and seeking their advice about how to proceed with the case.

[00:03:42] Now with the advances in technology and access to databases that provide great deal of information about effective practices I would probably still consult my colleagues and my supervisor but I might also take a few minutes to look at some of the websites that offer systematic reviews that provide a synopsis and synthesis of all the research has been done on a particular topic and use that to also inform my decision about what to do with the client. So because you've got these technological advances we now have access and the ability access to the databases and we can retrieve information we can find reviews where people have already done the legwork for us and I can simply refer to those and get them very quick and informative summaries that will help me make the best decision for clients that I've seen. I think that's a real departure from the way we've approached this in the past. Well can you give an example of how it might work. Well for example if I'm working in a child welfare setting or Family Service setting and I'm interested in parent training for example there may be dozens of agencies or dozens of programs offered in my community prepare intern and I need to ask myself which one is going to be the most beneficial for

my client and I may not have any good reasons to pick one over the other. Maybe some families I've worked with have had successes in one or have not really found one very helpful. And so I'm faced with a decision of where to make a referral or perhaps my agency is interested in offering some parent training program and I can go online and take a look at some of the systematic reviews that have been done and peer training.

[00:05:39] One of the most valuable sites for something like this might be the California evidence based clearinghouse on child welfare and simply going to that I can look under their list of topics for which they have already completed reviews of the existing research literature on effectiveness. Go to the parent training category and I will be given a list of programs and with a description of how much evidence exists to support that program. So I may find out that there are three programs that they give a scientific rating of one meaning that it's well supported by the research evidence. It also has a high rating indicating that it's appropriate for the the population that I'm working with they rated on the scientific strengths of the available research as well as the relevance of the program to a child Welfare Family Services setting. And I find that there are three programs that have that kind of research base. I can look at each one of those. I can see the descriptions of the program I can see resources in terms of the research that has been done. I have contacts for how to get additional information on the program if I need it and it's all my fingertips I can I can access this information in five minutes and have a much better idea of what kinds of programs are most likely to work with different types of clients. Do social workers need particular expertise to be able to do that kind of search. Come up with that information. Well not with what I'm talking about now systematic reviews which are the foundation for evidence based practice without systematic reviews. We really can't do evidence based practice and conducting a systematic review is a very cumbersome and time consuming process.

[00:07:42] Luckily we have researchers who have made it their business to do systematic reviews for practitioners so that as a service provider I can quickly go to the to the summary I can go to the systematic. And I don't have to undertake that process myself so much as systematic review any kind of backup. I don't know how much of this you've talked about in other other interviews but the stages of the systematic review there are seven steps in completing a systematic review systematic reviews begin with a practice or policy problem. And this is where practitioners and social workers in the community have a huge voice in helping us. Those of us in universities to understand where the practice and policy issues are where we need to be starting from that we are going to formulate what's called searchable question. We go out a good systematically view is comprehensive. It looks that published and unpublished literature it assesses the quality of the research it brings in only the most credible and rigorous research to date and conclusions on. And in some cases conduct what's called a meta analysis of statistical process aggregating all of the numbers across and across several studies in order to start to sort out which interventions will work for which kinds declines made it work better for adolescents than adults. Or maybe it works better for women versus men. Certainly all kinds of variation in the effectiveness of the service but a meta analysis will begin to tease that out then we can apply the results of a systematic review to the practice problem for example the parent training and they decide to adopt one of the highly rated scientifically supported parent training programs that doesn't necessarily guarantee that it's going to work in my agency however.

[00:09:55] So I still have the responsibility to continue to evaluate whether that intervention even though it has lots of evidentiary support behind it will work with my clients in my studying the way I would like it to. So it does sound complicated but luckily we've got folks who are doing that systematically report. We don't have to necessarily go out and track down all of the existing research so this is not something that a social worker actually goes out and does this is something that has been done by others completed by others. And the social worker then looks for these systematic reviews to apply it to a particular practice a policy problem that they're working on. Yes. And I think to be a good evidence based practitioner. The main thing is adopting this philosophy of

practice being willing to use the best available evidence to guide practice and policy decision making making a commitment to doing that and making a commitment to going out and finding systematic reviews and using those to guide decisions but also being able to acknowledge when rigorous research doesn't exist. So being able to say to the client under these circumstances we really don't have rigorous research to tell to guide them and acknowledging to the client that we are going to work on this together and try to find the best solution for you. It also means accepting an ethical obligation I think you know and use what works requiring that practitioners go out and access the systematic reviews and keep abreast of current developments.

[00:11:43] The one thing that constantly happening here is that we're getting new evidence all the time so our knowledge about what works with whom and under what circumstances is constantly evolving and as we get more and more of the systematic reviews completed our knowledge base about what works will become much more dense and extensive and also in this whole process part of this philosophy is in addition a willingness to include the client in the decision making process talking with them the best intervention in the world will not work for the client sitting across the desk if they're not willing to participate in that intervention. So is that what you mean when you say that evidence based practice is a philosophy of practice and a set of tools to be used in practice. Yes. So the philosophy is a willingness to embrace this way of thinking about practice and the method the tools are systematic reviews and that analysis doing a systematic review and doing that analysis. However I think belongs in the realm of research and should be undertaken by people who have the time and energy and resources to do those and then make those available disseminate those in such a way that they're easily accessible to practitioners who need that information quickly when faced with a new practice or policy problem. Aren't the systematic reviews though just literature reviews on steroids if you will. You know it's been a real common concern about these because everybody's done literature reviews in their classes in their social work programs and everyone kind of knows what the process is you go through. You have a point that you'd like to make can you go through and you find the articles that support the point and you summarise those and pull those together.

[00:13:47] But there are some real clear differences between the systematic reviews and literature reviews that we commonly and typically found in journals and we've done for our classes or we are students both of them begin with a clear description of the problem or the question that this review is going to address. So in that they're very similar. One of the ways that they differ is that with a systematic review the person undertaking a systematic review needs to very clearly and transparently state the criteria for including an X cluing study in their review and this is done to help prevent any intentional or unintentional bias that could creep into the review and influence the conclusions that are made. So the point of the systematic review is to provide an objective unbiased assessment of what works and by including the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The reader can assess whether the author of The systematical view was comprehensive in looking at the research or if there were some hidden biases that restricted their review and maybe eliminated the studies that may have shown that an intervention wasn't effective. We want to look at everything all the studies whether they have positive or negative outcomes. We want to make sure they're included. So the search strategy that the systematic review were will use will be very explicitly described in the review. Or they should be. So we should know what key words the researchers used to find the research we should know what databases they use if they get any hand searching of journals we'd like to know what journals they looked at.

[00:15:45] We need to have that whole process laid out with enough specificity that someone else could replicate it and in the best of all possible worlds systematic reviews will be replicated every two or three years to update them for new developments in the research. Another thing is as a systematic review goes through it will highlight several things as part of being this transparent process so it's going to talk about how the search is done what's going to be including included there'll be some reliability checking to make sure that only one person is not determining whether

an article or piece of research should be included or excluded for all of this is put out there in a very clear way that the reader of the systematic review can assess the quality and the credibility of a systematic review like other kinds of research. Not all systematic reviews are done according to the ideal standards that are out there. So one of the jobs of a practitioner is to try to assess whether the systematic review that they're looking at is a good one or not. So someone to think that that would go into that assessment are is a systematic review. Comprehensive unbiased and transparent doesn't use methods that can be critiqued replicated and updated. Does it clearly appraise the quality and the credibility of the research that it's reviewing to synthesize the available research. Does it draw conclusions about best practices and is it disseminated in such a form that practitioners can read it understand it and use it. I tell students in my class that if they're reading a systematic review and they cannot make sense of it it's not their fault. The author of the systematic review should be writing it in a way that it can be easily understood by practitioners who need to get this information quickly to make decisions.

[00:17:52] A lit review lacks many of the things it lacks the transparency that lacks the comprehensiveness generally and again some are better than others. But the main difference I think has to do with the transparency of the process so that you can determine whether it's complete and thorough or not. The process of being able to assess the quality or the value of particular a systematic review and even the process that you've described up until this point sounds very time consuming. How do you respond to a social worker who says I just don't have the time. Invested well in the sake of. I'm not sure that that time consuming part. I think the time consuming part truly is conducting a systematic review a good thorough systematic review can take a year or two to complete even with a team of 10 people working on it at once. So that's a very labor intensive process going to the systematic reviews finding them on line is actually quite easy. And if you carry in your head these simple rules about and I read that is it clear to me that that what they did was comprehensive did they cover what are considered to be the major journals in my field. Did they look at unpublished literature. There seemed to simple rules that you can kind of keep in your head so that you look at the systematic review you can begin to decide for yourself. Are these is this a good credible systematic review another way to go at this is to go to some of the Web sites that are available for practitioners that have a strong reputation for having credible reviews on their websites.

[00:19:47] So the Campbell Collaboration is an organization that sponsors and support systematic reviews. The a researcher who's interested in doing a systematic review for the Campbell Collaboration has to go through many steps or review to ensure that the review that conceded is as unbiased as possible and that it can be replicated and the author in that case agrees to replicate that systematic review every two to three 3 years to keep it updated. It's a free service. Practitioners can go online to the Campbell Collaboration dot org site. Put in a keyword and find out if there are any studies dealing with juvenile delinquency family violence substance abuse mental health issues and so on and the credibility of those systematic reviews is very high because of the stringent standards that are applied to them. There will be other systematic reviews at websites where the sponsors of the systematic review may have an ideological position that they're trying to support. In that case those reviews may not have the kind of transparency that you'll see in a systematic review on the Campbell site. So you have to be a critical consumer in terms of assessing the knowledge that providing a systematic review but when you conclude that you have a credible review you have a wealth of information that it would have taken you as a practitioner probably a year or two to collect or otherwise find the simple Appraisal Standards was a systematic review is really not that difficult. Okay so it sounds like Zande in terms of the beginning steps of wanting to do evidence based practice or doing evidence based practice. What one needs to do or what a social archetypically does is to identify a practice or a policy problem.

[00:21:44] The inquest they looked for or develop a searchable question and then they perhaps go

on appropriate websites to track down these systematic reviews. Right. And let me let me kind of lay out a strategy for doing that. That might be helpful. I have students unclasped who do this and as an assignment so they identify a practice problem teenage substance abuse. What kinds of programs are out there and or have been shown to be effective for addressing Adolescent Substance Abuse and maybe even find further to the alcoholism or crack or whatever the substances. Right now we just want to find out what's out there. Are there any systematic reviews that look at interventions for dealing with teenage substance abuse. One of the very easiest thing to do is to go to Google Scholar and do research on systematic reviews adolescent substance abuse. You will come up with a list of dozens of systematic reviews in journals and other sites that look at treatment programs for that issue for that problem. So there's one place to very quickly access systematic reviews addressing the issue that you're most interested in. Now that's a real quick way to pull up a lot happening but it doesn't solve the problem of wading through lots of systematic reviews. Now some of those may be in sight that as a practitioner you're already familiar with because there are a number of specialized Web sites that are out there depending on the area that you're interested in.

[00:23:32] You can find websites that deal with that provide systematic reviews on topics dealing with aging and mental health and child welfare criminal justice any topic you can think of many of these are government sponsored websites but you can also go to these websites which are in the business of cataloguing into a library the systematic reviews that are relevant to their areas service. So now there are two places to go quickly you can do quickly. A google scholar search. Secondly you can go to these specialized websites which also usually have you know places to to enter and search terms to get you quickly to the articles that you are interested in. You can also quickly go to the Kamble and Cochrane Library and again enter search terms and simply by highlighting the problem substance abuse the population adolescence and what you're looking for systematic reviews you will very quickly get to the pieces of information that are going to be the most helpful for use a practice decision maker doesn't have to take a long time. I know we've talked about this long strategy the searchable question. Those are strategies that come out of doing a systematic review. And what I'm proposing is that that's best left to people who have the time and resources to do the lengthy searches that that requires. What we're looking for and what practitioners need to have at their fingertips are the completed summaries of that research. In your opinion how does the evidence based practice process differ from what's been referred to as empirically based practice. Good question empirically based practice is part of our history and it was thought at some point it would be the ticket to bridging the gap between practicing research and the notion was that while there are two notions. One is that practitioners would use research to guide their decisions. And that was a good thing.

[00:25:47] The problem was that we often relied on a single article or two articles because we didn't have a good way to access the comprehensive picture of what works and often people would find one article and then use that to make their decisions. What I'm talking about what evidence they practice is a much more comprehensive look to give us a sense of what works with whom and under what circumstances and that's a very different model empirical practice also required that the practitioner engage in evaluation of their practice as a routine part of service delivery. That part still exists because we still don't know for sure when we adopt one of these evidence based practices. There's no guarantee that it's going to work for our client. There may be some significant differences in demographics type of problem. That that sets our clients apart in some way or the client that we're working with doesn't want to for cultural reasons for religious reasons reasons may not be willing to engage in the most effective practice that we have today. So all of that needs to be taken into consideration. So yes certain similarities between an empirical practice approach but evidence based practice now takes us a step further and giving us a much more broad base on which to base our decisions because we're accessing so many more articles. We're not looking for just the one that shows something works to prove that what we're doing is effective.

[00:27:32] We're looking at the broad synthesis of all the research that's been done in a particular area and then when we introduce that into our practice we're still looking we're still collecting information to find out is it working for us in our situation. We've talked about some of the benefits that that is based practice. What are some of the challenges. Well I think first we have to keep in mind that social work is pretty new to all of this and because of that I don't know that we've necessarily got all the bugs worked out for making evidence based practice that seamlessly with what we're doing out there in the community particularly when we think about the roles responsibilities for who does what in an evidence based approach to social work practice. I guess my position recently has been that we need a group of trained researchers people who know how to conduct and complete systematically things that are comprehensive objective unbiased and relevant to the problems that are being faced in the practice community. So that's going to require communication between researchers and practitioners about what are the issues that we need to be looking at and determining where are our most effective practices what are and what interventions are working. So I see that we need this this group of researchers who are prepared to do that kind of work and to make systematic reviews easily available to practitioners. The other side of this would be the practitioner role in evidence based practice. And I think their job is first to help the researchers identifiable are the important issues that we need to have a review done on. Secondly the practitioner needs to be able to know how to access systematic reviews that do already exist where to find them how to assess whether they're as transparent and unbiased as we would hope that they would be.

[00:29:44] And then taking that information once they found the systematic reviews viewing it through the lens of their practiced experience. Does this intervention make sense for the kind of client that they're seeing. Does it make sense given the cultural context for their content. Does it make sense in terms of their expertise to deliver this intervention. Do they know how to do this in a way that's likely to replicate. What's that sound in the research literature so all of that has to be viewed through the practiced wisdom that they bring to this process. And then the last part of this and by no means the least important of it is then having the discussion with their client about the intervention is the client willing to do this. Is it consistent with the clients values client culture. Time commitments and all of that so that the practitioners job can be summarized into three things I guess. Well maybe for helping to identify the issues that we need to have this genetic review is conducted on accessing the systematic reviews that do exist to find out what is the current state of knowledge on effective practice assessing that information that they receive from their reviews through their experience and practice with them. And then lastly having the discussion with the client about whether the most effective practice that we have asked is suitable for them on many different dimensions. So I would define this as there are two key roles in making evidence based practice in social work. One is the work of the researchers.

[00:31:25] People in the universities of Ph.D. trained folks who can begin to identify synthesize appraise the available research that's out there and begin to draw some conclusions about what works with whom and under what circumstances. And then the practitioner being able to access that information bringing it together practice wisdom and client preferences and values to determine how best to proceed with a particular case. So I think that's one limitation. We haven't done that definition of roles yet very well and that would be my suggestion of one way to approach this and others may have very different views on how to look at that. And then I think another limitation we have right now is that we're still in the process of generating genetic disease practitioners right now. They go to all of these websites may go to Google Scholar and find out that there has not yet been a systematic review conducted on the problem for which they need an answer. And in that case it's unfortunate but the practitioner will be in a position of simply proceeding with what has traditionally been done in that kind of situation with that particular type of client practice wisdom will play an increasingly valuable role as Will client preferences and values the expertise of other colleagues and supervisors may be important in this. We will continue to do business as we have

always done it trying to give clients the best possible services we can down the road as we get more and more of these systematic reviews. We will be able to introduce the best research evidence to help in that decision making process. Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you'd like to add. Perhaps she didn't get an opportunity to chat about on your watch or elaborate on that. You think social work practitioner ought to know about best practice.

[00:33:26] Well let me just kind of summarize and recap my position on evidence based practice and social work. As I just said I think that there are some very different roles to be played by the practice community and I know it seems a bit overwhelming but I do believe that once we begin to have systematic reviews available for practitioners to access and that we have them written in a way that can be understood doesn't it we depart from our fancy research language and put it into the language that practitioners can use. I think we will really begin to bridge that gap between practice and research that has historically been such a problem in Social Work. When we think about evidence based practice it requires both researchers to understand what the problems are in practice and it requires practitioners who are willing to look to the best available research to help guide their decision making and what to do in a particular practice situation. So down the road I see this as a model that really will have a tremendous impact on the way social work services are delivered. Eileen Gambrill has called this a paradigm shift and she may be right in as I think it requires a very different way of thinking about how we go about serving clients. The basis on which we collect the information mix it up with our experience and wisdom and engage the client in the process in a way that's much more likely to have long term beneficial changes for the clients. That doesn't take away the need to continually evaluate and add to our knowledge base about what works and that can happen in practice settings.

[00:35:21] It's also a branch of research that we need to continue to work on in our doctoral programs and in fact the research projects. So we now have just expanded I think the scope of how we're going to generate knowledge that's going to be relevant for practice. And as the technological barriers are reduced it becomes easier and easier for practitioners to access the information will begin to develop a a group of researchers who are producing the knowledge who systematically views that are going to be useful and we'll have a mechanism to disseminate that through computers that will make it available to practitioners quickly and easily when they need to come up with a solution for a new practice problem. Professor thank you for your time and for your insights regarding evidence based practice. You've been listening to Professor Denise Bronson discuss evidence based social work practice. Tune in again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the university and public school of social work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community with more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes the difference in people's lives.