

## **Evidence-Based Conflict Management Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the potential evidence-based practice holds for the field of conflict management. Evidence-based practice is first illustrated within the field of social work, as it is a comparable professional human service field and applied social science with a longer history with the approach than conflict management. This discussion surfaces many important critiques of evidence-based practice. The paper goes on to provide some initial foundations for evidence-based practice in conflict management. A six-step method for conducting evidence-based conflict management is then provided, along with examples of evidence-based conflict management practice. Overall, the paper contends that the future of evidence-based conflict management practice is promising. Ultimately, a list of recommendations is presented, in order to ensure that evidence-based conflict management practice is nurtured and reaches its greatest potential in the field of conflict management.

### **Introduction**

All applied professional fields (like the law, medicine, and social work) bridge a gap between scholarship and practice. In these fields, scholarship is frequently of an applied nature, concerned with the effectiveness of professional practice in human services, in order to help clients address their problems (as opposed to basic research, which concerns itself with more theoretical concerns). The applied professional field of conflict management is no different. When scholar-practitioners assist conflict parties with their complex conflicts, they face this gap and attempt to bridge the divide between scholarship and practice. When assisting conflict parties, conflict management scholar-practitioners have three sources of knowledge that they can draw upon, beyond the presenting information that they are given about the conflict itself: 1) previously-acquired intuition, skills, and practice wisdom; 2) previously-acquired knowledge of scholarship coming out of the field of conflict management or other aligned fields; or 3) newly-acquired context-relevant scholarship that they can uncover in a review of scientific evidence concerning a given conflict. The third of these sources of knowledge provides a unique framework for practice called evidence-based practice (EBP) and is the focus of this paper.

This paper considers what EBP is and how it is used. Although new to the field of conflict management (the framework has never previously been delineated in its entirety for the field of conflict management), EBP is one of the most well-known, rapidly growing, and contentious approaches to social work (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002; Gambrill, 2003; Mullen & Streiner, 2006). As an applied, professional field that assists clients address their complex social problems, social work is used here as an analogous field to help illustrate the approach (Hansen, 2013; Hansen, 2007; Rothman et al., 2001). On the surface, basing practice decisions on evidence seems like a very easy notion to support. Who would not want professional interventions to social problems guided by a close examination of scientific evidence that reveals the potential effectiveness of proposed interventions in specific contexts? In short, who would not want the most effective and proven social interventions possible to help them address their

social problems? However, when EBP is examined more closely, some of its more controversial dimensions emerge in sharp relief. As it is a new and unexplored practice framework in the field of conflict management, it will first be considered as an approach to social work, which is currently wrestling with many controversies stemming from the use of EBP. Social work is treated as a comparable profession here because it shares many theories and methods with conflict management, provides interventions for complex and diverse social problems at various societal levels, and is practiced by professionals who work collaboratively with their clientele, using applied social science research (Hansen, 2013; Hansen, 2007; Rothman et al., 2001). In addition, many intervention models in both fields stress an analysis of needs, interests, values, narratives, and identity concerns within a wider socio-political context, with practitioners who often employ problem-solving strategies (Rothman et al., 2001). Both fields are also interdisciplinary and draw scholarship from such fields as the law, psychology, sociology, and political science (Hansen, 2007). Finally, research in both of these fields is firmly grounded in practice, with both fields emphasizing evaluation research (Hansen, 2013).

This outline of EBP illustrates a novel practice framework for conflict management, providing a helpful, structured means for bridging a gap between scholarship and practice that can be challenging for practitioners. Such a gap between scholarship and practice has been noted by a variety of scholars in the field of conflict resolution (for instance, Hansen, 2013; Irving & Benjamin, 2002; Mayer, 2004; Schellenberg, 1996). On the other hand, the use of EBP raises a variety of contentious and thought-provoking questions that may introduce new challenges for conflict management scholar-practitioners. While this reflection must be ongoing, this paper presents a working model for conducting evidence-based conflict management practice, along with a set of recommendations to support its use and development within the field of conflict management. Even though EBP presents conflict management scholar-practitioners with some challenges, this paper contends that it holds a great deal of promise and should be nurtured.

### **What is Evidence and Why is it Used?**

In order to clearly delineate EBP for the field of conflict management, the term “evidence” as it is being used here first needs to be defined. In applied, professional, human service fields like conflict management and social work, what “evidence” means varies from context to context and is contested. At its most basic level, “evidence” is the information that practitioners and policy-makers use to guide their decision-making (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). In the legal field, “evidence” is forensic, constituting the material facts in a legal case that fit with various accounts or perspectives of an event (Davis, 2015). This evidence must hold up to legal standards, which emerge out of social, normative, and authoritative frameworks designed to determine legal rights and responsibilities in a given case (Davis, 2015). In the humanities, “evidence” constitutes information that comes from written and oral sources situated in specific social contexts, which give rise to concepts that are examined using moral and interpretive perspectives (Nelson, 1993).

However, EBP emerges out of the tradition of the applied social sciences, so the scientific method is used to determine what constitutes the best “evidence” in a given practice context (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). EBP scholar-practitioners use data that is derived from rigorous scientific studies as a foundation for making practice decisions (Rosenthal, 2006). This form of “evidence” must be demonstrably transferable to a specific social problem within a particular practice context (by ensuring that the data relates directly to the social problem at hand and came from a comparable context) (Payne, 2005). This means that practice decisions cannot simply be

made based on practitioners' intuition, philosophical bias, preferred techniques, or unsubstantiated opinions, but should instead be heavily influenced by a review of scientific evidence relating to a given case at hand (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011; Payne, 2005). This view of "evidence" places EBP scholar-practitioners squarely within the applied social sciences.

How evidence is used in applied, human service fields is a critical consideration in EBP. In conflict management, practitioners must make important decisions about interventions that ideally benefit their clients and ameliorate their complex social conflicts. When using EBP, evidence needs to be considered to determine if, how, and what type of interventions would ideally suit and assist conflict parties (for instance, Clarke & Peterson, 2016; Hansen, 2013; Irving & Benjamin, 2002). In so doing, evidence in the form of research findings could help practitioners to determine particularly relevant and effective theories (for example, social identity, narrative, or basic human needs theory), interventions (such as mediation, arbitration, or conflict coaching), practice models (for instance, the problem-solving, transformative, or narrative approaches to mediation), and techniques (like reframing, active listening, or open-ended questioning) for specific conflict parties in their particular circumstances. Therefore, it is important that EBP scholar-practitioners understand a variety of conflict interventions and approaches well, like a generalist (Hansen, 2013; Mayer, 2009; Schellenberg, 1996). If a practitioner is committed to a specific intervention or approach to practice, then conducting a literature review and an assessment of evidence specific to a given conflict in order to better understand the effectiveness of a variety of interventions or approaches would be unnecessary. In the field of social work, the consideration of possible interventions to assist clientele is called 'clinical decision-making' and it is this clinical decision-making that is predicated upon a client-specific review of the evidence in EBP (McCracken & Marsh, 2008).

### **The Origins of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work**

The term 'evidence-based practice' (EBP) emerged out of the medical profession and was coined by a medical team at McMaster University in Canada, in the 1980s (Rosenthal, 2006). The field of social work took notice of EBP the following decade and the practice took hold after the publication of a catalytic article entitled, "Should Social Work Clients Have the Right to Effective Treatment?" (Myers & Thyer, 1997). The underlying assumption of the article was that effective treatments for social problems can best be identified through rigorous scientific study. EBP therefore arose in social work to deal with the concern that social workers frequently do not use available scientific research as a basis for clinical decision-making (Mullen et al., 2008). Furthermore, many social workers felt that they had a duty to inform clients about the possible effectiveness and harms of the interventions that they offered (Gambrell, 2003). The application of EBP sparked a controversy in the field of social work that goes on to this day however, with social workers arguing very strongly either for or against evidence-based practice (Counoyer & Powers, 2002; Gambrell, 2003; Mullen & Streiner, 2006).

At its simplest, EBP means the blending of research, theory, and practice by social workers when they conduct their work assisting clients with their concerns (Myers & Thyer, 1997; Thyer, 2006). However, underlying the meaning are many assumptions that have important implications for social work practice. The use of EBP in social work implies that,

professional judgments and behaviors should be guided by two distinct but interdependent principles. First, whenever possible, practice should be grounded on prior findings that

demonstrate empirically that certain actions performed with a particular type of client or client system are likely to produce predictable, beneficial, and effective results... Secondly, every client system, over time, should be individually evaluated to determine the extent to which the predicted results have been attained as a direct consequence of the practitioner's actions. (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002, p. 799)

This means that social workers need to constantly strive to seek the best possible scientific evidence to justify their practice decisions and the results of those decisions should be evaluated on an ongoing basis to determine their effectiveness. Therefore, EBP social workers need to become aware of applicable research findings, using scientific data to help determine the best interventions, then monitoring and evaluating those interventions, modifying them as needed (Myers & Thyer, 1997; Thyer, 2006).

### **The Steps of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work**

In the field of social work, EBP is often characterized as involving five distinct steps. Roberts and associates (2006) characterize the steps in the following way: Step one involves converting client concerns into "answerable questions". Step two tasks social workers with conducting a review of available relevant research, locating the best possible evidence to answer those questions. Step three requires that social workers engage in a collaborative critical appraisal of the evidence with their clients. In step four, the clients and the social worker together decide on the best intervention to address clients' problems, taking into account the evidence, the expertise of the social worker, the preferences, strengths, and values of the clients, and other circumstances. The social worker and client also collaboratively establish criteria to judge the success of the intervention. Then the intervention takes place. Step five involves monitoring the intervention according to the pre-established criteria. Intervention modifications and adaptations are made as needed to help clients to reach their goals. Step five also involves conducting evaluation research on interventions when possible, to assess their effectiveness and improve them. Mullen and associates (2008) also suggest adding a sixth step, teaching others about the processes and outcomes, in order to spread knowledge about EBP. The steps were modified somewhat from EBP in medicine, in order to better suit social work. For example, modifications were made to accommodate a more collaborative decision-making processes between social workers and their clients (Mullen et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2006).

**Step one** in EBP, converting client concerns into "answerable questions", requires some skill. Crafting answerable questions involves creating inquiries about the effectiveness of possible interventions with specific types of clients, under specific circumstances (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2006; Thyer, 2004). Some examples of answerable questions in the field of social work would be:

- What are the effects of narrative therapy on women who have anxiety disorders?
- What is the most effective intervention to assist teens who are re-entering their family household after spending some time in foster care?
- If African American veterans are assisted with their drug addiction by Narcotics Anonymous, how likely are they to stay drug-free when compared to other drug treatment programs?

- Is a Syrian refugee more likely to find a living wage job by participating in a job training program or getting an Associate's degree at a community college?

Yeager and Roberts (2006) suggest considering several key elements when constructing an evidence-based question: the specific client, their particular concern, possible interventions, any potential comparison groups, and the specific outcomes sought (ideally ones that can be measured with reliable and valid measurement instruments). There is an art to determining how specific or general to make answerable questions in a given context (Yeager and Roberts, 2006). Good answerable questions are only helpful to social workers if they provide some insights concerning the best available options among several possible interventions.

At the heart of EBP is determining where to find the strongest forms of evidence in answering these clinical questions, which is **step two** in the process (Rosenthal, 2006). This involves conducting a review of scientific evidence that is custom-tailored to specific client concerns and the answerable question that has been posed (Myers & Thyer, 1997; Thyer, 2006). Social workers use studies that appear in peer-reviewed journals and published "best practices" suggested by leading associations in a field, along with their clinical experience. Scientific data is then evaluated to determine its relevance for clinical decision-making when assisting clients in a given case (Furman, 2009; Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Myers & Thyer, 1997). However, the use of studies from other contexts to inform clinical decision-making in specific cases remains a very controversial topic (Furman, 2009; Mullen & Streiner, 2006).

The available evidence in social work differs a great deal from what is available in medicine. In the field of medicine, randomized controlled trials are considered the "gold standard" for determining the effectiveness of interventions and meta-analyses of several randomized controlled trials are considered even better (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011; Roberts et al., 2006). However, in the field of social work randomized controlled trials are not frequently conducted for ethical or practical reasons and the precise impacts of interventions on client outcomes are very difficult to determine (Otto et al., 2009). For these reasons, preference for randomized controlled trials has been tempered somewhat in the field of social work, which utilizes a variety of ways of learning about clients, their problems, and the interventions that are used to ameliorate their concerns (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011; Otto et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2006). However, some forms of evidence are still considered more compelling than others (for instance, a meta-analysis is more persuasive than an anecdote and professional consensus among leaders in the field is stronger than a practitioner's lone opinion) (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011).

In **step three** of EBP, social workers thus compare the persuasiveness of arguments, considering the strength of evidence to inform clinical decision-making for a specific client and their concerns (Rosenthal, 2006). Therefore, an evidence-based social worker must use their understanding of research and their field to skillfully evaluate and apply research data in a given context (Thyer, 2004). McCracken and Marsh (2008) suggest that evidence should be used as an aid, in order to reduce practitioner bias and provide additional intervention opinions, rather than a mechanistic replacement for clinical decision-making.

Critical appraisals of evidence are particularly important in human service fields like social work, where client outcomes are not assured (Proctor & Rosen, 2006). Social workers must employ their research knowledge and skills to weigh available evidence. Thyer (2004) indicates that some rules of thumb are helpful when evaluating evidence, including:

- replicated research findings are stronger than findings from a single study alone

- having a comparison group in a given study makes the findings stronger
- randomized sampling techniques reduce biases in research
- rigorous research methods produce more solid findings

It is critical to go beyond the evidence though and assess the utility of research for given clients and their context, to determine its suitability and relevance (Proctor & Rosen, 2006). Therefore, scientific data must be assessed alongside practical context-specific concerns, such as:

- the availability of interventions
- the capabilities and limitations of one's organization
- particular client circumstances and preferences

These constraints require EBP social workers to adopt a collaborative, interpretive, and reflective posture to their work (McCracken & Marsh, 2008; Otto et al., 2009). Otto and associates (2009) go on to state that the intervention itself accounts for only a small part of what determines effectiveness and client outcomes, which are also impacted by:

- how interventions are carried out
- the relationship that a social worker has with their clients
- the emotional state and readiness of clients for change
- other circumstances beyond the control of social workers

Therefore, client preferences, strengths, values, and circumstances need to be recognized and prioritized in the evaluation of scientific evidence (Otto et al., 2009).

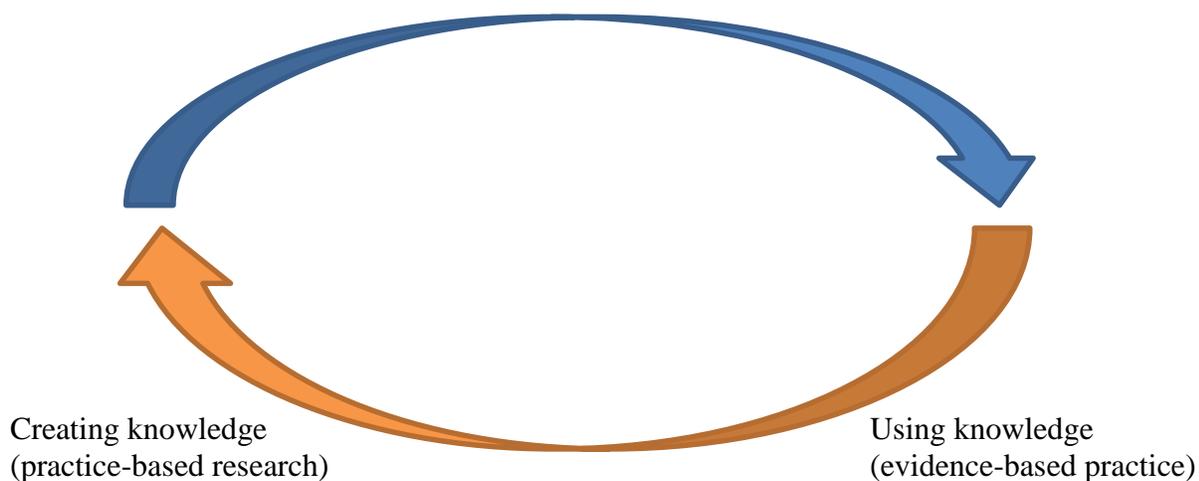
**In step four** of EBP, social workers and their clients must collaboratively decide on the specific interventions to be used and then they must then be carried out (Rosenthal, 2006). A strict adherence to EBP would suggest that any such interventions would represent the “best practices” in the field (ideally as determined by experimental or quasi-experimental research, if possible) (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). They would also be carried out according to standardized practice guidelines (specific, consistent ways of carrying out particular features of specific interventions), with delineated measurable outcomes that would be assessed by trained, external researchers (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). However, this is impractical in many practice settings so a more moderate approach is frequently called for in social work (Otto et al., 2009). Hence, Proctor and Rosen (2006) call for “composite” or “blended” EBP interventions that are suited to clients, their context, the social worker, and the organizational setting (rather than purely based on scientific evidence). These interventions should still employ:

1. “best practices” as defined by the field of social work.
2. standardized practice guidelines that illustrate how interventions are to be carried out.
3. measurable outcomes that are monitored and evaluated by social workers (rather than by external researchers).

This results in custom-tailored evidence-based approaches that adapt to each situation and practice setting (Proctor & Rosen, 2006). Viewed in such a way, each intervention with every

client is not a cookie-cutter solution dictated by rigid parameters defined by scientific data. Instead, an intervention is considered unique to each client system (Mullen & Streiner, 2006).

**Step five** of EBP includes intervention monitoring and evaluation as core elements (Myers & Thyer, 1997). Sometimes referred to as practice-based research, this component of EBP ensures that ongoing assessments determine if interventions provide hoped-for outcomes, are conducted in as helpful of a manner as possible, and unwanted unintended consequences are minimized (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011; Roberts et al., 2006). This type of research also completes the cycle of practice knowledge in EBP (see figure 1), producing findings that can later be used as evidence to assist with clinical decision-making and future interventions (Roberts et al., 2006).



*Figure 1:* The cycle of practice knowledge.

Step five also provides helpful information for the sixth and final step in EBP, teaching it to others and disseminating research findings. The knowledge acquired through practice-based research can be disseminated on a top-down basis, in social work training manuals and peer-reviewed journal articles, or on a bottom-up basis, becoming part of the knowledge-base for discussions with clients or fellow social workers (Mullen, 2006). The knowledge then provides a foundation for empirically-supported interventions (also known as “best practices”) and, more specifically, practice guidelines for conducting “best practice” interventions (Mullen et al., 2008). EBP social workers can then use this knowledge as evidence for future EBP interventions. In recent years, EBP has become more common in social work and it has been increasingly integrated into both formal education (university programs) and informal education (training) (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2006; Sundell et al., 2010). According to Shlonsky and Gibbs (2006), EBP social work education includes training in:

- research methods
- understanding and evaluating social science research
- an overview of critical field-specific research studies
- the EBP process itself

Empirically-supported interventions (“best practices”) and their specific practice guidelines then become the building blocks for EBP at the macro-level, influencing policy-makers, professional associations, and funders (Mullen & Bacon, 2006). In social work, many calls for EBP (often under the auspices of evaluation research) have been made at this societal level (Mullen & Bacon, 2006). One obvious advantageous impact is that policies, calls for regulation, and funding priorities are more likely to take scientific evidence into account, in addition to public opinion, political ideology, and the personal preference of policy-makers (Sundell et al., 2010). Creating policies and programs involves more than just assessing scientific evidence, as it often means confronting deeply-held societal convictions and challenging an entrenched *status quo* (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Sundell et al., 2010). At this level, empirically-supported interventions can be challenged by prevailing public narratives, the interests of policy makers, and resource constraints, so research must be powerfully and clearly presented (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Adoption of EBP at the macro-level begins with support by field-level associations and organizations that nurture EBP, ensuring its proper use (Mullen, 2006; Mullen et al., 2008). For instance, the Social Work Policy Institute of the National Association of Social Workers focuses on EBP in social work, endorsing and supporting EBP, as well as building awareness of it among policy-makers and funders (Social Work Policy Institute, n.d.).

### **A Critical Review of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work**

There are many valid critiques of evidence-based practice coming out of the field of social work which should be closely examined before the field of conflict management considers adopting the approach. As discussed above, the definition of evidence is contested, as evidence is judged in some professional or academic fields (such as the law and the humanities) more on the basis of normative, authoritative, or moral frameworks, rather than the scientific method, as advocated by EBP. Even within an applied social science like social work, some EBP scholar-practitioners put evidence on a rigid hierarchy that places quantitative knowledge in a privileged position above qualitative knowledge, while others suggest that this is ill-advised (Furman, 2009). Furman (2009) suggests that placing evidence on a rigid hierarchy may also privilege information and knowledge over values, the objectively measurable over subjective meaning, short-term social change over long-term change, as well as intervention models and technical skills over the practitioner/client relationship. Additionally, it is hard to weigh evidence (even when it is agreed upon), in order to determine if it is relevant for particular clients and their circumstances (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Otto et al., 2009). Moreover, there are often few reliable and validated measurement instruments to assess client outcomes (Sundell et al., 2010). The latter critique means that there is often little relevant data available to assess and apply to a given situation and almost no randomized and controlled trials of social work interventions, which are so highly prized in the field of medicine (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Otto et al., 2009).

EBP also complicates social work practice, potentially making it less efficient (Mullen & Bacon, 2006). EBP can take valuable time and resources away from the implementation of interventions (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). EBP requires time and effort to learn, in order to use it effectively. Some would even suggest that it is too inflexible, takes away social worker discretion in clinical decision-making, and misapplies research findings to contexts for which they were not intended (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). In that sense, one might even say that it represents an imposition by academics from the ivory tower, who ignore real practice-level concerns (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Ironically, there is also almost no evidence to suggest that it

works better than other approaches in the field of social work (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Thyer, 2004). In spite of these criticisms, it is clear that social workers do value it as an approach, want to learn more about it, and believe that learning about research and applying it to their practice would change their work with clients for the better (Mullen, 2006; Mullen & Bacon, 2006).

In response to the criticisms leveled against EBP in social work, proponents of the approach have suggested that EBP has been mischaracterized as being too mechanistic, offering cookie-cutter solutions to over-simplified social problems (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). They suggest that this characterization is unwarranted (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). EBP practitioners spend considerable time integrating their experience and expertise with clients' preferences, values, and contextual circumstances in their collaborative appraisal of critically-examined pieces of evidence (McCracken & Marsh, 2008; Thyer, 2004). This involves a great deal of finesse and skill, provides a wide range of discretion, and promotes custom-tailoring interventions to unique clients in particular circumstances (McCracken & Marsh, 2008; Thyer, 2004). Scientific data can also play a weaker role in clinical decision-making when limited directly-applicable research is available and a social worker's general background knowledge of research informs their judgement (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Basing clinical decision-making on previous scientific knowledge like this is called "evidence-informed practice" (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Otto and associates (2009) have even suggested that social work is passing through a second wave of EBP that is predicated on reflective interpretation and using evidence to dig deeper into the causes of client concerns, rather than offering simplistic solutions to complex problems. Otto and colleagues (2009) go on to state that EBP in its strictest form works best with predictable clients, with predictable concerns, under predictable circumstances, so a flexible EBP approach is called for, increasing social workers' responsiveness to their clients' specific concerns and contexts.

Three of the criticisms of EBP can also be thought of in positive terms. The criticism that there is not enough available scientific data in social work to regularly engage in EBP is considered accurate, for instance, but conducting more EBP and more practice-based research is also the remedy for this concern (Thyer, 2004). Over time in the field of social work, this heightened focus on EBP is resulting in an ever-increasing number of evidence-based interventions and practice guidelines, for which there is increasing awareness and interest among social workers, social work university programs, social work associations and organizations, policy-makers, and funders (Sundell et al., 2010). The concern that EBP requires more education and training can also be seen in a positive light. EBP education can be considered an integral part of continuing education and professional development, which is critical in any profession (Schlonsky & Gibbs, 2006). The criticism that EBP requires time and effort to implement in practice can be mitigated somewhat as training and practice with EBP increases practitioner efficiency with it (Thyer, 2004). As a helpful practice, Mullen and Streiner (2006) suggest reviewing evidence from scholarly journals and professional associations approximately 15-30 minutes each day to keep current with research. In addition, as monitoring and evaluation research is increasingly seen as a fundamental part of social work practice, over time it is less frequently considered an extra burden.

The criticism concerning the relative strength of different forms of evidence will continue to be controversial across the social sciences, with certain scholars showing a preference for quantitative scholarship over qualitative, for instance (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). There have been considerable strides in reconciling these debates though and illustrating that a 'both/and' approach to research is preferred to an 'either/or' approach, with qualitative and quantitative approaches seen as complimentary (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). There are definitely distinct

advantages to randomized controlled trials in determining intervention effectiveness and causality but as this form of research is relatively rare and ethically questionable in social work, it should not be relied upon as the “gold standard” of research on intervention effectiveness (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Otto et al., 2009). Instead, a more holistic and inclusive approach to what is considered evidence is called for. Certainly, some forms of evidence are stronger than others but EBP social workers are given considerable discretion to determine how evidence should be weighed under given circumstances, particularly with respect to their individual clients (Rosenthal, 2006). The utility of various forms of evidence is sure to vary depending upon the clients, their concerns, and their context, so they should be judged accordingly by social workers who understand their circumstances. Proctor and Rosen (2006) state that critical appraisals of evidence by social work scholars working to establish a professional consensus can be made available to other social workers to help them to make better judgements about the utility of evidence and become more effective EBP practitioners.

### **Discussion of Important Questions and Concerns for Conflict Management**

After having considered the merits and drawbacks of EBP in the field of social work, several questions emerge for EBP in the field of conflict management. EBP is new to the field of conflict management and many of the potential implications of its use remain unclear. When we consider critiques emerging from the field of social work, there are a variety of very real concerns and challenges to contend with when considering its potential in conflict management. To start with, EBP needs to be more thoroughly examined in the field of conflict management as it develops, as it is still in its infancy. From the above analysis of EBP in social work, it is clear though that it can inspire scholar-practitioners to become more aware of research and scientific evidence, to become more mindful of a wider range of interventions and approaches, and to engage in ongoing professional development in order to continue to learn about research methods and findings. It likewise can provide encouragement for the field of conflict management to continue to develop its evidence-base and produce more high-quality and increasingly-specific research (Irving & Benjamin, 2002). The development of EBP can only come with ongoing use, evaluation, and critical discussions about the approach within the field of conflict management.

For the time being, considering evidence-based conflict management practice surfaces important questions about the conflict management field and conflict management practice. For example, each scholar-practitioner may have a different perspective as to what extent conflict management should be considered an art versus a science (for instance, Hunter, 2007). EBP clearly places the field of conflict management in the social sciences, suggesting that it is as much a science as an art (Hansen, 2013). In addition, when deciding on the use of various conflict interventions and techniques, EBP could lead conflict management scholar-practitioners and their clients to prioritize a conflict intervention’s effectiveness (the ends) over its consistency with their values or the manner in which it is carried out (the means) (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Otto et al., 2009). This could be a potential pitfall or danger if scholar-practitioners inadvertently prioritize conflict management outcomes over conflict management processes.

More pragmatically, additional questions need to be considered by conflict management scholar-practitioners, such as:

- What constitutes strong evidence in a given conflict?
- Which scholarly journals or other scientific sources should be consulted?

These questions bring up one's allegiances to particular scholarly sources, as well as debates over the relative strength of various kinds of research and the extent to which evidence should be grounded in moral, normative, authoritative, scientific, or other frameworks of knowledge in conflict management (Cloke, 2001; Mayer, 2004). The answers to these questions bring up additional contentious concerns related to what the "best practices" are in conflict management and how they are determined (Bush & Folger, 2004; Cloke, 2001). It could be that certain individual scholar-practitioners, organizations, or professional associations could be predisposed to demonstrating the strength of their preferred interventions, rather than determining when and where they might be more or less appropriately used (Mayer, 2004). Furthermore, what criteria should scholar-practitioners use to evaluate evidence in practice? It can be difficult to reconcile contradictory research findings and apply them to a given conflict (Cloke, 2001; Hansen, 2013). How should evidence be balanced with other considerations like scholar-practitioner expertise, wisdom, and experience, client preferences, strengths, and values, ethical requirements related to neutrality or impartiality, and circumstances particular to conflict contexts? Inevitably, such a balance will differ from conflict to conflict and scholar-practitioner to scholar-practitioner.

Some might also question whether EBP is possible at this point in the field of conflict management as there are not always enough studies that clearly illustrate when certain conflict management processes or techniques would be more or less effective with certain types of conflict parties under specific circumstances (Irving & Benjamin, 2002). For instance, specific research examining the relative success of transformative versus narrative mediation in divorce cases with African American families or studies considering when active listening is best used with people from different cultures is limited at this point. Quite often there are also few conflict management intervention options available to choose from in a given circumstance (for example, in a transformative mediation center may only offer one type of intervention, transformative mediation). However, the body of conflict management research will continue to grow and develop, which will enhance the prospects for conducting EBP.

EBP scholar-practitioners as a group will need to have further discussions to consider a variety of practice-related concerns in more depth. One such concern is how to focus practice-based research in evidence-based conflict management practice, which is often labeled as 'program evaluation,' 'monitoring and evaluation,' or simply 'evaluation' (Clarke & Peterson, 2016; Irving & Benjamin, 2002). Practice-based research typically focusses on the effectiveness of conflict management programs or processes, however the practitioner-client relationship, the manner in which interventions are carried out, the conflict context, and conflict parties' states of mind can have a large impact on conflict outcomes, so a broader research focus is often called for (Hansen, 2013). In addition, it is important that practice-based research and EBP do not become excessively burdensome. Certainly, EBP scholar-practitioners get better and more efficient at consulting scholarly evidence, conducting research, and the process of EBP over time (Thyer, 2004). Consulting and applying scholarly sources of evidence to specific conflicts, as well as conducting practice-based research, then become a part of due diligence, rather than an additional burden (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Also, as scholar-practitioners become more familiar with the available evidence, the amount of time required finding relevant evidence is greatly reduced (Mullen & Streiner, 2006). Clearinghouses of studies, research reviews, and meta-analyses can make EBP much more efficient as well, ensuring that evidence is made accessible and is presented in understandable terms. For instance, health care professionals consult EBP clearinghouses like Cochrane to find current evidence to support clinical decision-

making in practice (Cohrane, n.d.). Ultimately though, EBP in conflict management will evolve over time as it is practiced and reflected on by the scholar-practitioners who employ it, refining it to their personal approaches and adapting it to various conflict management settings.

### **Some Foundations of Evidence-Based Practice in Conflict Management**

The utility of practice-based research has already been established in the field of conflict management. There are abundant scholarly articles and non-scholarly reports and papers which chronicle this form of research in the field (for example, Emerson et al., 2009). Various mediation scholar-practitioners for instance, have explicitly called for conducting evaluation research as an essential element of mediation practice (Irving & Benjamin, 2002). In *Therapeutic Family Mediation* (2002), Irving and Benjamin have a chapter dedicated to research in family mediation, stating that the evaluation research question “does mediation work?” has been well addressed by researchers over time with affirmative findings, so this question has increasingly given way to the question “how does mediation work?” in mediation evaluation research. They go on to state that the future of mediation research should become more specific to address the following question: “what intervention(s), in what setting or set of circumstances and with what group of clients, is most likely to have what consequences over the short and long term?” (p. 367). In order to answer this question well though, evaluation research will need to become a more explicit and integral part of mediation models and practice settings (for example, Umbreit, 1994).

Mediators also typically collect and use data that they collect about specific conflicts in practice. For instance, In *The Mediation Process* (2003), Moore dedicates a chapter to “collecting and analyzing background information” (p. 118) to uncover sources of conflicts through observation, interviewing conflict parties, and consulting written materials. The depth and complexity of this conflict analysis are contingent on the complexity of the dispute. The collection of background information can occur before and/or during a mediated session between conflict parties. This phase of mediation is characterized by Irving and Benjamin (2002) as “Intake/Assessment” (p. 72), which helps to determine if specific clients and issues are good candidates for mediation. It is important to note that this phase of mediation also helps mediators to establish rapport and a positive working relationship with the conflict parties, as well as prepare those parties for their mediation session (Irving & Benjamin, 2002; Moore, 2003). However, this form of conflict analysis falls short of EBP as these models do not explicitly and formally integrate consultation with relevant research studies as part of the process, nor do they require the use of scientific evidence in practice or incorporate the formal step-by-step EBP process for helping to decide how to go about mediating.

Other areas of specialization in the field of conflict management have illustrated the value of practice-based research. Facilitation practice models for instance, frequently explicitly integrate evaluation research in facilitation practice. For example, in *The Facilitator's Fieldbook* (1999), Justice and Jamieson provide a whole chapter dedicated to evaluation and group closure, stating that evaluation allows a group to consider the effectiveness of a meeting agenda and group process work, allowing the group to improve their group interactions over time. Much of the time, this consists of a relatively simple evaluation process, asking participants what they liked about the facilitation and what might be improved next time. In *The Art of Facilitation* (2007), Hunter recommends including “measurable outcomes (for the overall process, workshops, meetings) plus expressive and descriptive spoken and written material (from the individual

participants)” when designing evaluation processes for specific facilitations (p. 312). Bens (2005) also suggests that evaluation surveys should be given out to facilitation participants at the conclusion of facilitation processes “to assess the degree to which expected results were achieved” (p. 157) and facilitators should go further, supporting their clients to monitor and evaluate their implementation strategies after any facilitated meetings have concluded. This approach mitigates a potential concern that evaluation research could be limited to a focus on improving the facilitation process itself (formative evaluation) in some cases and may emphasize communication activities or short-term outputs of the process, rather than longer-term outcomes (Hunter, 2007). Facilitators are often very skilled at conducting formative evaluations, which provide a platform for the second half of the cycle of practice knowledge, using evidence in practice (Bens, 2005; Hunter, 2007; Justice & Jamieson, 1999).

Dispute systems design also frequently incorporates practice-based research. For example, Raines (2013) makes a call for evaluation research to be integrated into organizational conflict management systems, such as customer service systems. She goes further to state that evaluation research design should be considered before conflict management systems (like complaints departments) are implemented, in order to ensure that the systems are created with the end goal in mind and baseline data can be collected before any dispute systems are implemented. In organizational settings, evaluating conflict management mechanisms is particularly important as suggested by the precept “what gets measured gets done”. This suggests that practice-based research needs to be integrated into organizational dispute systems to make sure that they fulfill organizational needs to the greatest extent possible (Raines, 2013).

### **Evidence-Based Practice in Conflict Management**

As it is clear that the foundations for EBP are present in the field of conflict management, it becomes possible to present a specific EBP model for the field. The steps involved in evidence-based practice presented here for conflict management scholar-practitioners as helpful practice guidelines. The steps should not be considered rigid, as it is possible to loop back in the process and conduct the steps in a different order. They are presented here as the most common way to conduct evidence-based practice in conflict management, immediately after a conflict has been referred to a scholar-practitioner. The steps are as follows:

Step 1 – **Interrogate the conflict:** Conflict management scholar-practitioners work with conflict parties to turn their concerns into answerable questions. Examples of answerable questions in the field of conflict management would be:

- What is the most effective conflict management process for landlord-tenant disputes between family members?
- If divorcing parents partake in a facilitative, problem-solving mediation, how likely are they to arrive at a sustainable parenting arrangement that they are both satisfied with?
- Is arbitration likely to be helped or hindered by a simultaneous strike in union-management disputes?

Step 2 – **Find and review scientific evidence:** Scholar-practitioners find the best possible evidence to answer those questions. Sources of evidence include:

- good research studies (qualitative and quantitative) in scholarly journals about relevant conflict management processes from comparable contexts
- meta-analyses
- evidence-based practice manuals
- clearinghouses of conflict management research and research reviews
- any experiential or anecdotal information to augment scientific evidence

Step 3 – **Analyze the evidence:** Scholar-practitioners work with conflict parties to critically appraise the evidence. This critical appraisal must be taken into account in conjunction with such factors as:

- the scholar-practitioners' expertise, wisdom, and knowledge
- the preferences, strengths, and values of the parties
- commitments that scholar-practitioners have to impartiality or neutrality
- organizational and pragmatic constraints
- particular contextual circumstances

Step 4 – **Collaborative decision-making and conflict management implementation:** Scholar-practitioners and conflict parties collaborate to decide on the best conflict management interventions to address the concerns related to the conflict. *The interventions are then implemented.*

Step 5 – **Monitoring and evaluation of conflict management:** Scholar-practitioners monitor the results of the conflict management processes according to criteria jointly established by them and the conflict parties, modifying conflict management processes, if necessary. This also means conducting evaluation (practice-based research) to assess intervention effectiveness (of both processes and outcomes), improve conflict management processes, and provide further scientific evidence for practice, completing the cycle of knowledge.

Step 6 – **Sharing lessons learned:** The step involves teaching EBP to others both formally, in university conflict management programs, and less formally, in conferences, workshops, and discussions with colleagues. This step is considered vital to ensure that EBP becomes more efficient and effective, continues to improve, and is disseminated to an ever-widening sphere of practitioners.

For example, in a workplace conflict where two colleagues who had a falling out are instructed to work together on a long-term work project, they come to an ombudsperson (a conflict management scholar-practitioner) for help. The ombudsperson uses an EBP approach to assist them with their working relationship. Initially, the ombudsperson engages with them in separate conversations to determine the nature of their concerns and their differing perspectives. This is then used as a basis for asking an answerable question, such as: what would be the most effective form of mediation (among the narrative, transformative, or problem-solving mediation models) to assist two male, middle-aged Caucasian work colleagues (who once worked well

together but had a dispute about a promotion that one of them received ahead of the other), in order for them to have a productive working relationship? The ombudsperson would then consult the available current scholarship on workplace mediation and conflict management involving middle-aged, Caucasian men, discussing any important findings separately with the parties. This would provide critical information when considering the most effective mediation models for their concerns, possible mediators, where and when they would like to mediate, their criteria for a successful mediation, and so on. They would then collaboratively select a mediation model, a mediator, and the timing and setting for the mediation, which would subsequently be conducted. The mediation would be monitored according to the expressed desires of the parties and assessed using evaluation methods. Other processes, such as training in conflict management skills, would also be considered to compliment the mediation and meet any other needs. Finally, the ombudsperson could share what she learned, as well as her knowledge of EBP, at conferences or ombuds workshops or, less formally, in discussions with colleagues.

An example of an EBP approach to conflict management is provided by the Generalist Approach to Conflict Resolution (Hansen, 2013). In the Generalist Approach, conflict management scholar-practitioners recognize that there are many possible conflict management interventions in any conflict and work with their clients to determine the best-fitting interventions for specific conflict parties under particular circumstances. Generalist conflict management practitioners initially develop rapport with conflict parties, while getting relevant background information during an initial one-on-one intake. Then they use this information, in conjunction with scholarly evidence, to collaboratively consider a range of possible conflict interventions, the nature of the outcomes that their clients would like to achieve, and how to measure progress, in a workshop format. Monitoring the intended and unintended consequences of the interventions is an explicit part of the Generalist Approach. Hansen (2013) discusses using single-system research designs (also called N=1 research designs) as a monitoring strategy. In single system research designs, parties work with conflict management scholar-practitioners to determine their indicators of success, which are then measured periodically before, during, and after conflict interventions (single systems research designs are discussed more thoroughly below). Formal evaluation of intervention effectiveness, especially using qualitative techniques, is also an essential component of the Generalist Approach. Conducting and using research is therefore integral to the Generalist Approach, when using evidence for intervention decision-making, to monitor the effects of interventions on clients, and to evaluate intervention effectiveness and client outcomes. Scholar-practitioners using the Generalist Approach need to be familiar with research methods, participate in ongoing professional development, and present their evaluation research findings, for the ongoing improvement of conflict management.

Single-systems research designs are well established in the field of social work as a practice tool but are relatively new to the field of conflict management. Tripodi (1994) provides a nice overview, stating that single-systems designs are used to measure what parties determine are the most important changes that they would like to see as a result of an intervention ('indicators' of success). In conflict management, these could involve improving ones relationship with another conflict party or getting ones interests met (Hansen, 2013). These indicators can be measured formally, using established research instruments when available, or less formally, using simple tools created with parties (for instance, their assessment of their relationship on a scale of 1-10 that they create) (Hansen, 2013; Tripodi, 1994). The results are graphed simply (connecting the dots that indicate parties' scores on the scale on subsequent occasions), to show parties their progress over time, illustrating the effects of an intervention and providing them with data to

help determine how they would like to proceed in dealing with their concerns (Hansen, 2013; Tripodi, 1994). Often, graphs illustrate how an indicator evolves over the course of several phases of intervention: pre-intervention (baseline), during an intervention (often on several occasions, sometimes during a pause in the intervention), after an intervention (a post-test or a follow-up measure), or even during a subsequent intervention (Tripodi, 1994). The resultant graphs illustrate one's progress over the different intervention phases. Scholar-practitioners can then go over the graph with conflict parties to inform their decisions about how to proceed with their concerns.

As the above examples show, it is possible to conduct EBP in the field of conflict management. Concerns over its use still remain, however. As with the field of social work, EBP remains untested in the field of conflict management so there is no evidence of its effectiveness. The evidence-base for the field of conflict management is continues to develop, so there are still unanswered questions and ambiguities in the field's body of scholarship, potentially making it difficult to find strong evidence as a solid basis for evidence-based conflict management intervention decision-making (Irving & Benjamin, 2002). Frequently, the scholarship that is available in the field contrasts conflict management processes with traditional mechanisms for managing disputes like the courts, rather than comparing different conflict management processes or models directly with one another (see, for example, Kelly, 2004). Like the field of social work, conflict management is a type of human service with a broad definition of what constitutes scientific evidence (for example, including both quantitative and qualitative methods as complimentary) but it is still unclear how different types of evidence may be evaluated or the extent to which they might augment or conflict with one another. EBP is in its infancy in the field of conflict management and will need to be further developed to ensure that it does not result in simplistic, cookie-cutter solutions to complex concerns and situations. EBP scholar-practitioners must also guard against the tendency to become too rigid in their application of scientific evidence in practice. EBP also requires time (particularly initially, to learn about using and conducting research, applying research, and acquiring a broad knowledge base) and resources (like access to journals) that introduce costs to scholar-practitioners, which must be considered. Sometimes in the field of conflict management there are few interventions available to specific clients (a lawyer that was hired to mediate might only be familiar with an evaluative style of mediation, for instance) so it may not prove very useful or efficient for such practitioners to engage in formal EBP. Even when scholar-practitioners are not able to offer conflict parties various conflict management options, it still makes sense for all practitioners to have a solid knowledge of research to engage in 'evidence-informed' practice, ongoing critical reflection, and practice-based evaluation research. However, EBP in its most robust and complete form may be limited to more predictable and common conflict concerns and contexts, for the time being.

EBP has a great deal of potential in the field of conflict management, reinforcing a scientific perspective. It can help bridge the gap between scholarship and practice, underlining the value of using research methods in practice and providing a formal approach for doing so (Counoyer & Powers, 2002; Hansen, 2013). These methods ensure that "best practices" and practice guidelines are grounded in research findings and promoted (Sundell et al., 2010). EBP also reduces biases in practice and policy decision-making, guarding against interventions falling short of expectations or even potentially harming conflict parties in unforeseen ways (Mullen & Streiner, 2006; Thyer, 2004). EBP provides conflict management scholar-practitioners with a structured approach for selecting intervention options and ensures that scientific evidence for conflict management effectiveness is sought, utilized, and disseminated (Thyer, 2004). This is

particularly important in an era of increasing scrutiny by policy-makers, regulators, and funders, who increasingly call for scientific evidence and demand evaluation research (Hansen, 2013). Some of these benefits can be realized with an adoption of ‘evidence-informed’ practice by conflict management scholar-practitioners who embrace a reflective, inquisitive posture in their work, while other benefits require a more formal adoption of EBP. In order to meet this potential, EBP can be naturally incorporated into university conflict management programs, particularly those requiring research methods as a course of study. In fact, EBP can be seen as a sort of levelling mechanism, whereby new practitioners can gain knowledge from the proven wisdom and scholarship of established practitioners. Indeed, if EBP is to be taken up in earnest in the field of conflict management, it should be incorporated into university programs as a means to teach it to the next generation of scholar-practitioners, who can continue to develop it and custom-tailor it to the unique clients, conflicts, and settings that they will face in the future.

This analysis of EBP’s potential in the field of conflict management leads to several recommendations to support the growth of EBP in the field:

1. The field of conflict management can be considered an applied social science.
2. As conflict management can be considered an applied social science, university programs teaching conflict management should include education in research methods, understanding research, and applying research in practice, in addition to some specific training on EBP and practice-based research (monitoring and evaluation).
3. Practice-based research, including evaluation methods, should become more common in conflict management practice, to build a more thorough base of scientific evidence for the field. As evaluation methods develop and research findings become more comprehensive, more emphasis should be given to assessing the effectiveness of conflict management interventions with specified clients, conflicts, and contexts, rather than considering the effectiveness of interventions in more general terms. These studies should strive to incorporate comparison groups when possible.
4. Additional field-level and organizational support should be provided for EBP and the scholar-practitioners using the approach, which could include providing clearinghouses of studies, research reviews, meta-analyses, practice guidelines for “best practice” interventions, and EBP practice manuals.

These recommendations provide some initial steps towards ensuring that EBP will reach its potential within the field of conflict management.

## **Conclusion**

This paper considered EBP and its potential within the field of conflict management. The origins of EBP within the field of social work were presented first, to provide an overview of EBP within a comparable professional, applied social science that has a longer history with the approach, as well as illustrate some challenges when applying EBP to complex social problems. Many important concerns with EBP came out of this discussion that are directly relevant to the field of conflict management and should be carefully considered. EBP should also be reflected upon by scholar-practitioners experimenting with the approach, to ensure that it continues to develop within the field of conflict management. A specific six-step method for conducting EBP in conflict management is outlined here, along with specific examples of EBP, which illustrate

specific practice guidelines for conducting EBP in conflict management practice. The Generalist Approach to Conflict Resolution, for instance, incorporates such a conflict-specific review of scientific evidence when considering possible conflict processes with parties.

The potential for EBP in the field of conflict management is clear. It is a structured approach that addresses the gap between scholarship and practice, ensures that conflict management practice is grounded in solid research findings, and reduces scholar-practitioner biases. EBP provides an additional safeguard against ineffective or even harmful practice. Generally, the use of research methods in conflict management is promoted, particularly practice-based research. Therefore, a list of recommendations to support the growth of EBP in the field of conflict management was delineated. These recommendations could help EBP to reach its greatest potential in the field of conflict management.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that that EBP holds a great deal of promise for the future of conflict management but it should be carefully developed to mitigate some of its potential drawbacks. One of the primary places that it can be fostered is in research methods classes in conflict management university programs. This will allow the next generation of conflict management practitioners to nurture the approach and tailor it to the unique settings of their future clients' conflicts. Meanwhile, considering EBP brings up a variety of important questions for conflict management scholar-practitioners to consider, discuss, and debate.

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