

Singapore's Strategy in Delivering Social Services in the Community: The Family Service Centre Model and Its Evolution towards Evidence-Based Practice

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Introduction:

Family Service Centres (FSCs) in Singapore play a unique role in supporting at-risk, underprivileged, and vulnerable families and individuals “to help them achieve independence, stability and resilience” (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017). FSCs are run by voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) and are funded largely by the government. As of 2017, there are 47 FSCs in Singapore.

Since 2013, FSCs in Singapore have been going through major changes in their way of working, mainly initiated by the government. These changes are intended to improve professional standards to meet the increasingly complex demands. However, as the FSC sector grows, increasingly subsidized and more standardized, are we necessarily getting better at what we do?

One important aspect of professionalization of social work is Evidence-Based Practice (EBP). Rubin (2008) defined EBP in social work as:

“a process for making practice decisions in which practitioners integrate the best research evidence available with their professional expertise and with client attributes, values, preferences and circumstances.” (Rubin, 2008, p.7)

This study aims at examining the status of EBP in FSC work in Singapore now, as compared to time before the recent changes were introduced.

Objectives/Goal/Purpose:

To examine the extend of EBP in FSC work in Singapore over time.

Methodology:

A combination of literature review of FSC history and policy documents, personal experience in the field, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners (respondents). Key respondents interviewed belong to one of the following groups:

- 1) FSC Leaders
- 2) FSC Practitioners
- 4) Supervisors in FSC
- 5) Field Placement Students

Where FSC Leaders and Supervisors have at least 5 years of experience in FSC work to be able to observe changes over time.

Interview questions were crafted based on Sackett et al (1996)'s model of Evidence-Based Medicine, a widely-adopted model in the field of social work, plus various discussions on the favourable and unfavourable conditions for EBP in social work to develop (e.g. Drisko and Grady, 2015; Wike et al, 2014). A few areas identified for explorations were:

- 1) Practitioners' perceived readiness and barriers;
- 2) Agency's effort to support practitioners in EBP;
- 3) Government's positioning of FSC work, funding and regulating requirements as experienced by FSCs and practitioners;
- 4) Training of social work professionals in EBP-related skills; and

- 5) Availability, accessibility and relevance of research and research support related to practice.

A total of 9 FSC workers and 1 placement student from 4 FSCs were interviewed. Among the 9 workers, four were at the level of Executive Director (ED) or Centre Head; three were Supervisors and two were Social Workers.

A Review of Development of FSC Model in Singapore

Community-based social work first started in the sixties by VWOs in response to the need to rebuild communities due to massive relocation of citizens from squatters and villages to high-rise housing estates. As services evolved, the focus gradually shifted from building communities to supporting vulnerable families. The first FSC was piloted in 1977 by the government with a dual focus on community and family work.

As the population expanded, the government recognized the need for more FSCs. Based on an evaluation report in 1989, the FSC model was established, where VWOs were invited to establish FSCs with a certain amount of funding provided to run 'core services' of casework and counselling, information and referral, family life education and volunteer management. Over the years, the key feature of funding 'core services', which is predominantly casework, has not changed.

From 2013, Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has initiated a fresh wave of integration exercise, where all FSCs are required to adopt 'Code of Social Work Practice' (FSC-CSWP), which specifies the mission, target, range of services, level of competencies expected, and how case management and assessment are conducted in FSCs. It paves the way for integration of different intervention methods and enhances outcome management.

The review shows that FSC Model has moved from bottom-up, partially-funded community efforts to a more centralized, regulated and subsidized service.

Key Findings from Interviews with Respondents

At individual level

Respondents generally observed an increase in the education level of practitioners, and their awareness of EBP concepts. However, these concepts have yet to be manifested in practice. Respondents were more confident in identifying relevant studies when conducting their own practice research. They mostly read about practice through internet but not books or journal articles. Workload has been and remains a major barrier for them.

EBP was discussed mainly as research evidence and practice evidence. Among the four parts of EBP proposed by Haynes et al (2002), Client's Preference was seldom mentioned, except for the feedback form required in case closure as one evidence to be collected.

At agency level

It was found from the interviews that FSCs have always been collecting evidence relevant to their work. In the earlier days, needs assessments were initiated to facilitate planning of services; now evidence is collected more for reporting purpose. Some respondents viewed the increasing reporting requirements as a progression to EBP, but others see it as prescriptive and overloading, thus may not be helpful to EBP.

Supervision was named as the main support for staff to be more evidence-based in their practice. Sending staff for training (both on research and on research-supported interventions), encouraging the use of intervention with research evidence, and having relevant books and references are examples of support offered by agencies to promote EBP. Two agencies have their own research team and projects. However, none of the agencies can provide protected time for staff to conduct research or to read up. It is very much a personal pursuit.

The main barrier for agencies to support EBP is competing tasks and workloads. Some EDs and supervisors also pointed out that staff are usually content with doing what are required, and to achieve a mindset change is not easy. Some also pointed to the lack of provision from the government for research on the ground, and the lack of sharing of research results among FSCs. Most respondents had not seen a 'culture' of EBP in their agency yet.

Respondents' view of sector development

Some respondents saw the current FSC Model as a step towards EBP, as more justifications are now required for interventions. Family and Adult Support Tool (FAST), a standardized assessment tool in the FSC-CSWP, can be used to quantify progress of cases; the rich data collected can be mined for further understanding of FSCs clientele. One respondent pointed out that the current changes would lead to a natural selection process where some workers would eventually choose to leave the sector. However, another respondent had a very different point of view, that the recent changes severely limit autonomy and mental space of practitioners by being overly prescriptive and highly administrative. Two respondents pointed out that FAST is 'generic' and is unable to help with assessing the variety of needs in FSCs clientele. A few respondents had mixed views – they understood the good intention but did not see how it would work well given their current workload.

Social Work Academics and Research Resources

Over the years, the number of graduates and post-graduates in the profession has been on the rise to meet the manpower demands due to rapid expansion of FSCs since the millennium. Together with this change is an increase in research on local issues and practice, which was limited during the beginning days of FSCs. A more recent development is the increase in collaboration between universities and FSCs in studies of trends and interventions. Accessibility of research resources has also improved as the National Council of Social Service has started a research support unit. National University of Singapore has also started research trainings tailored for practitioners.

Positioning of FSC in Social-Political Landscape

Over the years, FSCs have become a crucial part of government's responses to individuals and families who 'fall through the cracks' of various social security measures. Although FSCs are not yet required to demonstrate their effectiveness in intervention to secure funding, there is an increased pressure perceived by FSC workers to perform as the complexity of issues faced by Singapore families has increased. It will be of interest to FSCs to develop their own practice-based research.

Conclusions:

This study aims at comparing the status of FSCs of Singapore in terms of promoting EBP over time. It is found that FSC workers nowadays are in general more attuned to the concept of EBP and are more aware of the various interventions available. The macro environment is more conducive to EBP as well, with increased resources and collaboration between academics and practitioners in research particularly pertaining to local issues and needs. However, the actual implementation of EBP is still limited by the many other tasks that practitioners and the

agencies need to do under the latest FSC Model, which compete for their time and resources. Future evidence on FSC-CSWP effectiveness will provide a more definite answer to our queries.

Limitations

This study was conducted within a short timeframe of 3 months in 2017 on top of the author's normal work commitment as a practitioner. The number of respondents was the best that could be recruited in such a timeframe. The selection of respondents was based on personal acquaintance, which skewed towards small-scale FSCs rather than FSCs that are part of a larger social service provider. With the nature of this study, and with such a small and selective sample, the results cannot be considered as representative of the entire population of FSC workers in Singapore.

Main References:

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