

A Proposed Ethical Framework to Assist Social Workers in Selecting Therapeutic Interventions

Milê Glamcevski PhD(Psy), M.Med.Sc, M.Ed(Ed.Psy), M.Soc.Work(Qual), M.BA
onPsych
Melbourne, Australia

Justine Anne Collins PhD(ClinPsych), BSc.,Post.Grad.Dip.Psych.,M.ClinPsych
onPsych
Sydney, Australia

Abstract

The current paper contains a critical literature review used to evaluate contemporary ethical papers and evidence-based guidelines for the assessment of new interventions. The paper aims to synthesize the literature to formulate a conceptual framework for Social Workers to consider ethically new therapeutic interventions for the benefit of their clients. Two models that appear to have traction in the contemporary domestic literature and provide user-friendly, practical application for ethical decision-making is the Boyle and Gamble (2014) Decision Assist Model for Australian Psychologists (DA-MAP) and the Barnett and Johnson (2008) Stage model for ethical decision making which will be critically reviewed and combined. The combined models will provide ethical guidelines for selecting an intervention and provide a framework for ethical review at various stages of a new intervention, including (a) pre-meeting the client, (b) initially meeting with the client, (c) performing the intervention, and (d) terminating the intervention.

Keywords: therapeutic intervention selection, social workers, ethical decision making

Introduction

This paper will critically review and evaluate contemporary ethical papers and evidence-based guidelines for the assessment of new interventions. The paper will aim to use the literature to synthesize a conceptual framework for Social Workers to ethically consider new therapeutic interventions for the benefit of their clients. Specifically, two models appear to have traction in the contemporary domestic literature and provide user-friendly, practical applications for ethical decision making, namely the Boyle and Gamble (2014) 'Decision Assist Model for Australian Psychologists' (DA-MAP) and the Barnett and Johnson (2008) 'Stage model for ethical decision making'. These models will be combined to provide ethical guidelines for selecting an intervention. Additionally, this paper will demonstrate how merging these models provides a framework for ethical review at various stages, including pre-meeting the client, initial meetings with the client, performing the intervention, and terminating the intervention.

In providing services to communities, Social Workers will be obliged to consider new and unfamiliar therapeutic interventions at numerous junctions. Indeed, Geldard's (2011) research found that over five hundred therapeutic approaches were currently in everyday use. This array of interventions suggests that social workers will constantly be exposed to new interventions. Further, Geldard's findings highlight that there are significantly too many interventions for a social worker to be cognisant of. However, principles exist to guide practice/decision-making. Specifically, the first measure of an intervention is that it is ethically valid and reliable. Thus, new therapeutic interventions need to be ethically appraised before being used or rejected (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010 & 2020; Harms, 2007). Hence, Geldard's findings emphasise the necessity for social workers to conduct a comprehensive and systematic ethical appraisal when employing new therapeutic interventions, a point stressed in core documents and principles of the Australian Association of Social Workers (2010; 2020).

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics (2020) and the AASW Practice Standards (2013) are key documents that underpin the review of research about ethical decision-making for new therapeutic interventions for Social Workers. The AASW Practice Standards (2013) guide the profession when appraising new therapeutic interventions. Specifically, attention needs to be given to the following Practice Standards:

1. Values and Ethics, specifically section 1.2 “Manage ethical dilemmas and issues arising in practice”; Standard 4. Knowledge for practice, “Social Workers have and obtain the knowledge required for effective practice”; and Standard 5. Applying knowledge to practice, “Social Workers demonstrate the skills necessary to implement knowledge into practice.”

The ‘sister’ profession of Psychology provides invaluable documents when ethically evaluating a new therapeutic intervention. In particular, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) Code of Ethics (APS, 2007) sections on Respect (A.2), Competence (B.1), Informed consent (A.3), Non-exploitation (C.4), and Evidence-based (informed) practice, combined with the APS (2010) literature review for evidence-based psychological (therapeutic) interventions in the Treatment of Mental Disorders, provide a comprehensive framework for consideration. In contrast, the AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers (2014) simply highlights the requirement for knowledge and skills of the profession (of social work) in the assessment and treatment of mental illness/disorders without providing any further guidance. Therefore, this paper will aim to provide a path for social workers to comply with specific requirements of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics (2020) Part 3: Ethical Decision Making, which states:

Several general principles guide sound, rigorous and reflective decision making, including having comprehensive and as relevant information as possible on the matter about which a decision is being made; observing appropriate confidentiality and duty of care requirements; identifying the risks and benefits to each of the parties affected by the decision, and documenting the issues considered and the decision-making process and outcomes. In pursuing ethical outcomes, social workers will be able to articulate their decision-making process; demonstrate the factors considered, and provide justifications to make themselves accountable for their decisions.

Method

The basic methodology of the current paper is a literature review. The literature review provides an overview of published and other available materials to determine current theoretical issues and discussions and the contemporary knowledge about these issues (Aveyard, 2019). Several advantages of utilising a literature review as a research methodology have been identified by Aveyard (2019) and Glasziou (2001):

- (1) A literature review develops concepts and conceptual sensitivity by providing a platform for contrasting influential ideas, discussions, and concepts.
- (2) It stimulates questions, ideas, discussions, and concepts that were previously not considered or analysed.
- (3) It can substantiate results or demonstrate where and how the contemporary literature is potentially simplistic, incorrect, or incomplete.
- (4) It allows and assists in encouraging the formulation of ways of making arguments about the importance of the work and the models developed from it.

Conversely, Aveyard and Glasziou point out that some of the disadvantages of a literature review include a lack of synthesis resulting in a simple list-like writing activity essentially describing what previous research has found. Furthermore, they suggest that it can lack discrimination between relevant and irrelevant literature.

Another issue of literature reviews is that they can be based on out-of-date material or material established as incorrect or lacking sufficient critique. Accordingly, the current literature review aims to describe the readings and implement this knowledge as a platform to develop and propose a framework for ethical decision-making. A succinct literature review summarises current knowledge on the topic and can be used to develop a conceptual framework for evaluation.

A critical literature review, also known as a critical evaluation, or critical appraisal, engages in analysis and conceptual innovation that can lead to a hypothesis or model by synthesizing knowledge into a narrative, conceptual framework (Aveyard, 2019; Glasziou, 2001). Another element of a successful literature review is the establishment of rationale and meaning of the research, and its significance, via demonstrating its position in what is previously acknowledged about the subject matter. Therefore, the current review will constitute a critical literature review, that is, one that is descriptive in nature, in an effort to critically evaluate the quality of the research (Glasziou, 2001).

Ethical models

Social Workers require ethical decision-making models and ethical frameworks for selecting new interventions. However, much of the literature on Social Work focuses on the conditions for intervention (Hardina, 2013), how these interventions should be conducted (Lishman, 2004; Trevithick,

2005), managing interventions, and the risks of the intervention (Hardina, 2013), thus, failing to provide frameworks for selecting interventions. Influential texts such as Moore and Colleagues (2009), Sudbery (2002), Trevithick (2005), and Harms (2007) detail that Social Workers need to be able to change or adapt treatment plans (interventions). Yet few models cover the mechanical (practical) steps in selecting interventions. The AASW Code of Ethics (2020) provides a framework for Social Workers to act in an ethical manner and directs them always to seek resolution of ethical conflicts. These ethical decisions also need to be in accordance with various legislation, laws, regulations, and governance guidelines (Kampf et al., 2009). But the AASW code of ethics offers little in the way of pragmatic steps for selecting therapeutic interventions.

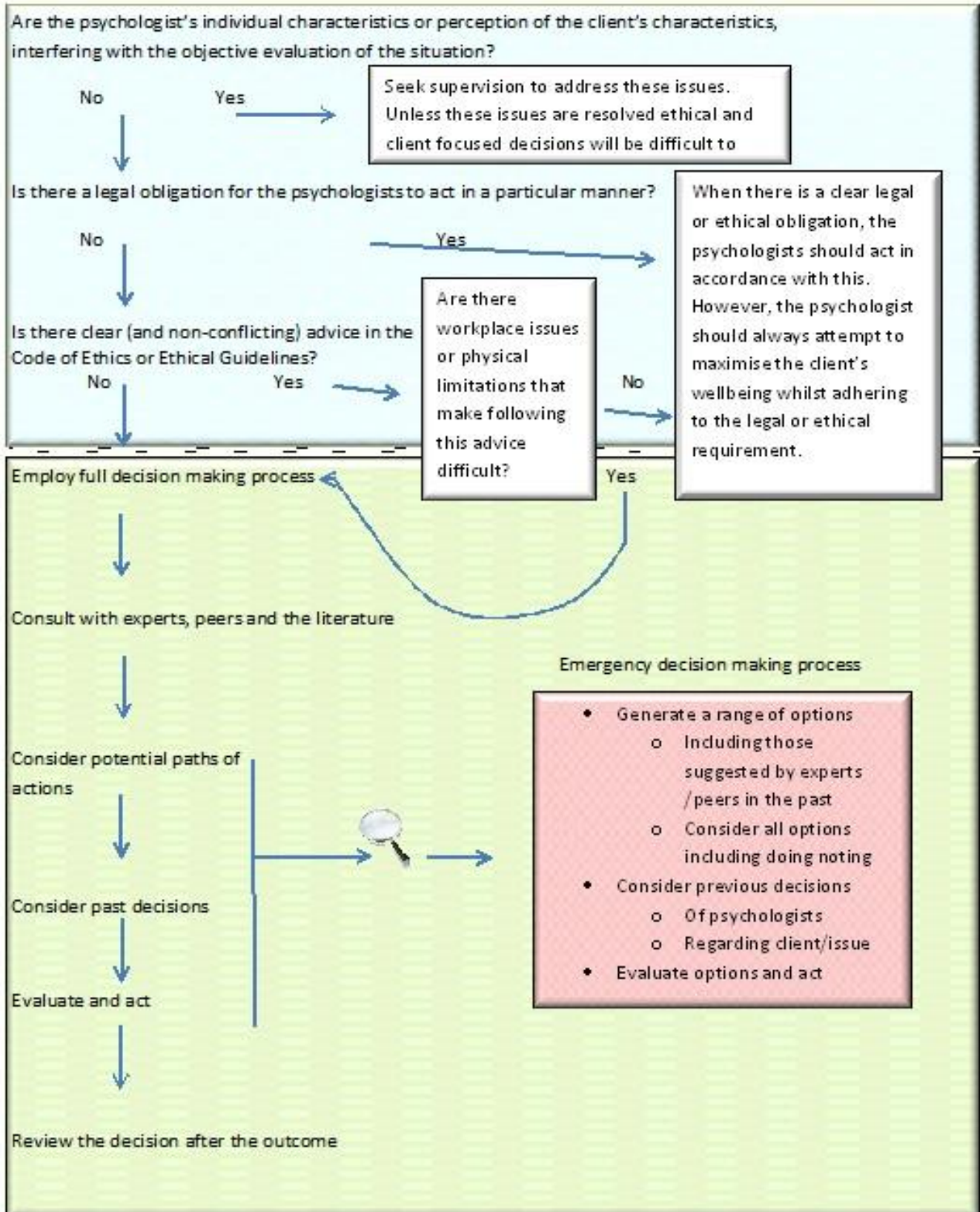
To assist Social Workers in selecting ethical and appropriate therapeutic interventions, this paper will examine two models designed to help choose from existing interventions; one from an Australian source and the other internationally based. Both models have an established history of being used to review the ethics of therapeutic interventions by a broad range of mental health professionals, including social workers. Critically, the current authors argue that the DA-MAP and the Stage model combined can provide a robust, effective, and pragmatic decision-making tool for Social Workers.

Model 1

Presented in Boyle and Gamble's (2014) work, the DA-MAP (Figure 1) is an ethical decision-making model for therapeutic interventions. This model initially began in the psychological community but has extended out into the Australian mental health community. Primarily this model is consistent with social work ethical interventions, as it focuses on ethical decisions for the client's welfare. The DA-MAP systematically moves through phases. It begins with an evaluation of legal requirements, then the focus shifts to ethical guidelines, followed by an action phase, resulting in actionable outcomes by the practitioner.

The "Decision Assistance Model for Australian Psychologists" is as follows:

Decision Assistance Model for Australian Psychologists (DA-MAP to ethical behaviour)



Model 2

The 'Stage Model' is another popular model for decision-making concerning new interventions. The Stage Model proposes ten stages to make well-informed, ethical decisions (Barnett & Johnson 2008):

- (1) Clearly define the situation.
- (2) Determine what parties could be affected.
- (3) Reference the pertinent ethical codes.
- (4) Reference the pertinent laws and regulations.
- (5) Reflect on personal thoughts and competencies on the issue.
- (6) Select knowledgeable colleagues with whom to consult.
- (7) Develop alternate courses of action.
- (8) Evaluate the impact on all parties involved.
- (9) Consult with professional organizations, ethics committees and colleagues.
- (10) Decide on a course of action.

As outlined, the DA-MAP and the Stage model are two notable models which can manage ethical considerations with new therapeutic interventions. However, it is proposed that the constructive combination of these two models results in an improved ethical framework to analyze various stages of new interventions, namely:

- Pre-meeting the client,
- Initial meetings with the client,
- Performing the intervention and
- Terminating the intervention.

The key concept to developing this new model is that Social Workers have the opportunity for evaluation at each stage, thereby ultimately enhancing the selection and the safe application of interventions as per the code of ethics.

The proposed combined model

Pre-client work

There are multiple considerations regarding a potential new intervention and its ethical considerations in the stage of 'Pre-meeting the client'. One of the most critical considerations for Social Workers is evidence-based practice (AASW, 2014; AASW, 2020). This consideration is achieved by reviewing relevant literature, practising wisdom, and observing AASW (and other applicable) standards (Boyle & Gamble, 2014).

Another critical consideration is that Social Workers ethically need to 'do no harm' (non-maleficence), which is the 'golden rule' of any intervention (AASW, 2014; AASW, 2020; APS, 2010). Specifically, Social Workers need to identify and consider possible controversial issues about the intervention to protect the public image and the public's perception of the profession. Boyle and Gamble (2014) highlight the requirement to consider the problems that can make the intervention problematic. Issues that can be viewed as harmful or potentially harmful include, but are not limited to, lack of evidence, physical risk, intimate contact, and levels of competence for applying the new intervention/s (Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). In addition, intending to advance the ethical validity of an intervention, as part of their practice, Social Workers need to explore their values about the client, client group, the intervention's value, the effectiveness of the intervention, and other such pertinent questions (Bunker & Alban, 2012; Ivey, 2010).

Initially meeting the client

At the initial meeting with the client, it is required that significant information is provided to meet the requirements of informed consent (AASW, 2020). Informed consent aims to provide an environment for clients to make self-determinations (AASW, 2020). Several key documents and texts (AASW, 2014; AASW, 2020; APS, 2010; APS, 2015) discuss in detail the requirement of informed consent. However, as Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2016) pointed out, there are minimal standards and few enforced benchmarks for informed consent despite the significant information available. Barnett and Johnson (2008) emphasize the issue of a lack of enforced minimal standards for informed consent. This is a significant deficiency; some critical components of commencing an ethical intervention are to explain the rationale of the procedure, the evidence available supporting its use,

the processes of the intervention, identifying any potential risks, and consideration of the Social Worker's experience and training with the intervention.

To select the most appropriate intervention, the Social Worker needs to obtain the client's treatment goals and assess the suitability of the intervention for the client. To meet the suitability requirement, an examination of the client's environment, characteristics, and circumstances needs to occur. This examination generally includes the assessment of emotional and psychological vulnerabilities, social supports and networks, finances, insight, behaviors of concern or risk, and sociological environment. Once intervention selection has occurred, in accordance with the current codes of ethics, the client needs to be informed about their right to decline the treatment or withdraw from the treatment at any time. The Social Worker must explain the circumstances under which termination of the treatment may occur and the limits of confidentiality (AASW, 2007; AASW 2020; Kampf et al., 2009). In line with ethical codes, before intervention selection is complete, discussion about the treatment options needs to occur, especially about more conventional, available, and other evidence-supported treatments.

Beginning and conducting the intervention

The volume of information about commencing a therapeutic intervention is considerable (Bunker & Alban, 2012; Geldard, 2011; Ivey, 2010). Ethical interventions have procedures in place to continually discuss the intervention with the client, and the ability to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention as it progresses, which is well captured in work such as Barnett and Johnson (2008), the Mental Health Council of Australia (2010) and the Community Mental Health Guiding Principles (Department of Health). A brief meta-analysis of the literature recommends that the Social Worker monitor the same aspects as those at the initial meeting of the client once commenced. These aspects include seeking evidence-based interventions, monitoring potentially controversial or problematic issues, continued exploration and reflection of the Social Worker on their values, and ensuring that they have suitable competencies.

Another noteworthy point presented in the bulk of the literature (Bunker & Alban, 2012; Geldard, 2011; Ivey, 2010; Trevithick, 2003) is that social workers must monitor their values, responses, and competence, for the life of the therapeutic intervention. This monitoring prevents or reduces the chance of unethical behavior and decisions negatively affecting the intervention/client. A

point often absent from the Social Work literature is the Occupational Health and Safety (OH & S) requirement to ensure a physically and emotionally safe environment for all. This seems to be left up to the organization's guidelines and insurance requirements to outline the OH & S.

Terminating the intervention

Social Workers retain a professional requirement to have a well-articulated process of gauging when and how it is appropriate to terminate an intervention (AASW, 2020; Barnett & Johnson, 2008). Key texts discuss appropriate termination when the intervention has met the treatment plan goals, that is, when to end the therapeutic activity due to completion (Ivey, 2010), in addition to a wide variety of other reasons the Social Worker may be required to terminate the sessions before the therapeutic activity has reached a successful conclusion.

Some conditions for considering termination include: when the client is making poor progress and a different or more demanding service is required (i.e., a referral out is necessary because the client is not benefiting from the current service); the client presents with a situation or condition of significant risk, which cannot be managed appropriately, and a referral out is necessary; or the Social Worker may not be competent to deal with the issue for which they are attempting (presented with) an intervention. Another potential reason for termination might include monitoring or assessing the intervention. For a termination to be done ethically within the bounds of the intervention, it is recommended to seek counsel from a senior colleague and/or engage in professional supervision. It is recommended that the client be advised of the reasons for termination while ensuring an active referral and handover to another appropriate professional occurs (or is presented as an option). This type of approach to termination is supported by AASW (2014; 2020) and APS (2007; 2010) codes of ethics and guidelines.

Summary

A conceptual framework for ethically considering a new intervention can be articulated using the domestic and international literature reviews, practice standards, and codes of ethics by the AASW and APS, coalesced within ethical models such as the DA-MAP and Stage model. The current paper utilized a literature review to synthesize a conceptual framework that can be used to ethically consider new therapeutic interventions by Social Workers for the benefit of their clients. The literature was critically analyzed to look at the ethical guidelines for considering the various stages of the intervention,

including pre-meeting the client, initial meetings with the client, performing the intervention, and terminating the intervention. The basic framework can be presented in the checklist below:

Checklist

Before meeting the client:

- Evidence-informed (evidence-based practice)
- Potentially controversial or problematic issues identified
- Explore/reflection on your own values
- Have suitable competencies to deliver therapy

Initially meeting the client:

- Client's goals for obtaining treatment
- Is the proposed intervention suitable for the client
- Sufficient details of the proposed treatment provided to the client
- Consider broader characteristics/circumstances
- The choice to participate, decline or withdraw provided to the client
- Alternative, more conventional treatments available discussed
- Conditions under which to terminate treatment articulated
- Confidentiality and its limits articulated.

During the intervention:

- Safety and does it meet the OH&S requirements
- Measure the effectiveness/Monitor progress
- Check-in regularly on your own values & informed consent

Termination:

- Know and agree on when to terminate
- Review work with colleagues and supervisor.

A critical review of the literature revealed several consistent and repetitive guiding principles for ethical decision-making with new interventions. The overriding principle was 'do no harm' (non-maleficence). Rather poignant but straightforward that no harm through the intervention should befall the client. Secondly, the logical follow-on was that the intervention should improve the welfare of the client while doing no harm. Next, the ethical framework for selecting new interventions should lead to the client's best possible outcome (or at least an improved outcome) by addressing the difficulties in their current situation. Using the proposed framework Social Workers can make appropriate clinical judgments supported by evidence-based practice.

The best practice revolves around a comprehensive and systematic appraisal of evidence from the literature (i.e., evidence-based practice), particularly professional bodies' guidelines and published research studies, to use interventions that provide maximum benefit and minimum risk to the client. Professional bodies such as AASW and APS provide lists of therapies with established efficacy. They have considered the available evidence to support ethical decisions for using a new intervention. These guidelines, combined with the proposed model (checklist) of selecting therapeutic interventions, allow Social Workers to choose the most apposite and ethically sound intervention.

In conclusion, an effective systematic framework is required to select appropriate new interventions in order to be an ethical practitioner. An effective systematic framework enables Social Workers to select and use interventions with a high degree of confidence while maintaining the rights of the client. Social Workers remain proficient and effective by basing interventions on firm theoretical underpinnings supported by empirical evidence and ethically reviewed for the client's benefit. Interventions need to be vigilantly monitored and terminated if it is causing harm or not benefiting the client.

References

- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2010). *Code of ethics*. Australian Association of Social Workers.
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2020). *Code of ethics*. Australian Association of Social Workers.
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2014). *Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers*. Australian Association of Social Workers.
- Australian Psychological Society. (2007). *Code of Ethics*. Australian Psychological Society.
- Australian Psychological Society. (2010) *Evidence-based Psychological Interventions in the Treatment of Mental Disorders: A Literature Review* (3rd ed.). Australian Psychological Society.
- Australian Psychological Society. (2015). *Ethical Guidelines on Confidentiality*. Australian Psychological Society.
- Aveyard, H. (2019). *Doing a literature review in health and social care: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Barnett, J. E., & Johnson, W. B. (2008). *The ethics desk reference for psychological interventions*. American Psychological Association.
- Boyle, C. & Gamble, N., (2014). *Ethical practice in applied psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Bunker, B. B. & Alban, B. (2012). "The large group intervention—A revised new social innovation?" *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 28, 473-80.
- Department of Health & Human Services. (2011). *Positive practice framework; A guide for behaviour support services practitioners*. State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Geldard, D. (2011). *Basic personal counselling: A training manual for counsellors* (5th ed.). Prentice-Hall.
- Glasziou, P. (2001). *Systematic reviews in social work: A practical guide*. Cambridge University Press.

- Hardina, D. (2013). *Interpersonal social work skills for community practice*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Harms, L. (2007). *Working with people: Communication skills for reflective practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Ivey, A.E. (2010). *Intentional interviewing and counselling: Facilitating client development*. Brooks Cole.
- Kampf, A., McSherry, B., Ogloff, J., & Rothschild, A. (2009). *Confidentiality for mental health professionals. A guide to ethical and legal principles*. Australian Academic Press.
- Koocher G.P. & Keith-Spiegel, P. (2016). *Ethics in psychology and the mental health profession: Standards & cases*. (3rd Ed.). Oxford University Press
- Lishman, J. (2004) *Communication in social work*. Macmillan/BASW.
- Mental Health Council of Australia. (2010). *Community mental health guiding principles*. Mental Health Council of Australia.
- Moore, E., Randall, C., & Barton, H. (2009). Practice functions. Chapter 5 in E. Moore (Ed.), *Case management for community practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Sudbery, J. (2002). Key features of therapeutic social work: The use of relationship. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 16(2), 149-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0265053022000033711>
- The Australian Government Department of Health. National Standards for Mental health Services: Guiding Principles for the Standards. Department of Health Guiding Principles for the Standards, accessed 6 July 2021.
- Trevithick, P. (2003). Effective relationship-based practice: A theoretical exploration. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 17(2), 173-86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026505302000145699>
- Trevithick, P. (2005) *Social work skills: A practice handbook*. Open University Press.

Funding: No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Data availability: The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Acknowledgements: None.

Competing Interests: None.

Address for Correspondence: email: mile_glamcevski@hotmail.com

Publication Date: Dec 15, 2022