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Social Work's Scope of Practice in the Provision of Primary Mental Health Care: Protocol for a Scoping Review

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**Social Work’s Scope of Practice in the Provision of Primary Mental Health Care: Protocol
for a Scoping Review**

Rachelle Ashcroft, PhD ¹
Toula Kourgiantakis, PhD ¹
and
Judith Belle Brown, PhD ^{2,3}

¹Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

²Department of Family Medicine, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, Western
University, London, ON, Canada

³School of Social Work, King’s University College, Western University, London, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Rachelle Ashcroft, PhD
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V4
Canada
Phone: 1-416-978-6314
Fax: 1-416-978-7072
Email: rachelle.ashcroft@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Introduction: Social work is a key member of interprofessional primary health care teams, and foundational to primary health care reforms that aim to improve the provision of mental health care. Little is known, however, about social work's scope of practice within primary health care settings, particularly in the provision of mental health care. The objective of this study is to identify and describe social work's scope of practice as it relates to mental health care in primary health care settings. **Methods and analysis:** Arksey and O'Malley's¹ scoping review methodology will guide this scoping review. We will search electronic databases (MEDLINE, Embase, PsycInfo, CINAHL, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts) to identify studies appropriate for inclusion. One reviewer will independently screen all abstracts and full-text studies for inclusion, with supervision by lead investigator. We will include any study which focuses on social work and mental health care within primary health care settings. All bibliographic data, study characteristics, and range of social work practice activities will be collected and analysed using a tool developed by the research team. **Ethics and dissemination:** The scoping review will synthesise social work's scope of practice in the provision of mental health care within primary health care settings. This review will be the first step to formally develop guidelines for social work practice in primary health care. The results will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed publication and conference presentations.

Strengths and Limitations

- This will be the first scoping review study to identify social work’s scope of practice in the provision of primary mental health care
- Scoping reviews cover vast volume of literature and will provide a broad understanding of social work’s contribution to mental health care in primary care settings
- Inclusion criteria is limited to English
- No formal assessment of quality will be applied to articles included in this study

For peer review only

Introduction

There is strong international evidence that supports that the optimal location for responding to the growing population needs for prevention and management of mental health disorders resides in primary health care²⁻⁴. The development and implementation of interprofessional primary health care teams has helped support Canadian and US health care reform goals of improving access, quality of care, and availability of services to meet the needs of an increasingly complex patient population⁵⁻⁸. One approach to achieving health care reforms has been by strengthening interprofessional primary health care teams with the inclusion of mental health providers such as social work in order to enhance the availability, capacity, and quality of mental health care⁵⁻¹¹.

As one of the few non-medical providers in primary health care, social work brings an expertise and philosophy that complements aims of primary health care practice, and skills for the provision of mental health care^{5,8,12}. Collaborative care interventions that include social work and other mental health providers can be highly effective in improving outcomes for primary health care patients with mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety^{3,13-17}. Although there has been a recent increase of social workers working in interprofessional primary health care team settings, greater clarity is needed to help social workers determine how to develop their role in order to effectively contribute to collaborative care interventions^{5,9}. Currently no practice guidelines exist that can provide clarity to social work in the provision of mental health care within primary health care settings. Scope of practice refers to the range of roles, functions, responsibilities, and activities which professionals are educated and authorized to perform¹⁸. Identifying the current state of knowledge regarding social work's scope of practice related to primary mental health care will help provide a foundation for the development of future practice guidelines.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this scoping review are to i) systematically scope the literature on social work, mental health, and primary health care; and ii) identify the range of roles, functions, responsibilities, and activities that social work is performing in order to describe social work’s scope of practice. This work will constitute the first step in the development of guidelines to support social work practice in primary health care. This information will help provide guidance to social workers and other leaders in primary health care in determining how social work’s scope of practice can best compliment the interprofessional team in helping to address demands for mental health care.

Methods and Analysis

Our study is employing scoping review methods to help provide a broader understanding of social work’s scope of practice in the provision of mental health care in primary health care settings. A scoping review is a method of knowledge synthesis that “addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting and synthesizing existing knowledge”^{19, p. 5}. Systematically mapping a subject field is particularly useful when literature on a topic is being compiled for the first time, when minimal literature exists for a particular topic, and/or when the investigation is examining a complex or non-homogeneous topic^{1,19-20}. Scoping reviews also provide an opportunity to identify key concepts, gaps in research, and evidence that can help guide practice and policymaking²⁰. Knowledge synthesis like scoping reviews are essential for advancing health care practices and can help knowledge users – in this case social workers – increase inclusion of efficient evidence-based decisions in practice¹⁹.

Following recommendations from Colquhoun *et al.*¹⁹, our methods for this study are based on a five-stage scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O’Malley¹ and

enhanced by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien²¹. Five stages informing our review are: i) identifying the research question; ii) identifying relevant studies; iii) study selection; iv) charting the data; and v) data summary and synthesis of results¹. We consider this an optimal framework for our current study due to the infancy of the subject matter and scarcity of evidence-based studies.

Stage one: Identifying the research question

Levac *et al.*²¹ recommend clarifying stage one¹ by combining a broad research question with a clear scope of inquiry that defines the concept, target population, and relevant health outcomes in order to clarify the focus of the scoping review. Levac *et al.*²¹ also recommend developing the research question with the intended outcome of the scoping review in mind to help determine the purpose of the study. In this case, the purpose of our scoping review is to provide clarity about social work's scope of practice in the provision of primary mental health care that may help contribute to practice guidelines which are currently absent. Through consultation the research team has defined the research question as: "What is social work's scope of practice in mental health care when working within primary health care settings?".

Stage two: Identifying relevant studies

At stage two¹, we seek to identify available literature on social work providing mental health care within primary health care settings. Levac *et al.*²¹ recommend strengthening stage two¹ by assembling a suitable research team with combined content and methodological expertise to ensure successful completion of the scoping review. We have followed Levac *et al.*'s²¹ suggestion and have assembled a team that combines expertise in primary care (JB/RA), social work practice in health (JB/RA/TK), mental health care (JB/RA/TK), and scoping review

methodology (RA/TK). We have also identified a graduate-level research assistant who will participate in all phases of the scoping review.

We have met with a health sciences librarian at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada to determine databases and keywords. Identification of studies relevant to this review will be achieved by searching the following databases: MEDLINE, Embase, PsycInfo, CINAHL, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts. Search terms have been developed with input from the research team and consultation with an experienced research librarian. Database searches will combine terms from three themes: social work, primary health care, mental health. Search terms being used to identify relevant studies are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Search terms being used to identify relevant studies

Concepts	Search Terms
social work	social work*
primary health care	primary care, primary health care, medical home*, family physician*, family practice, family medicine, general practice, nurse practitioner*, physician*, doctor*
mental health	mental health, mental disorder*, mental illness*, common mental disorder*, anxiety, depression

Terms will be searched as keywords in the title, abstract, and subject headings as appropriate. Inclusion criteria is limited to English language. No date limits will be applied. Search results will be downloaded and imported into RefWorks.

Stage three: Study selection

At stage three¹, the review process will be comprised of two levels of screening: i) a title and abstract review; and ii) full-text review. For the first level of screening, the graduate-level research assistant – working under supervision of lead authors - will independently conduct title scans and abstract reviews to assess eligibility against inclusion criteria. Articles that are considered relevant will then be included in the full-text review. Any discordant full-text articles

will be reviewed by both the research assistant and the lead investigator to determine if they meet inclusion/exclusion criteria. As well, any discordant full-text articles will be discussed with the second investigator until consensus decision is obtained.

Relevant studies will be assessed against the following inclusion criteria: i) the words social work, primary health care (inclusive of search terms), and mental (inclusive of search terms) are used in the title or abstract; ii) social work is a key focus of the article; iii) the article focuses mainly on mental health care (inclusive of all types of mental health care except substance use); iii) primary health care (inclusive of search terms) is a main focus of the article. Any type of study design will be included, as well, commentary articles will also be included. We will follow Levac *et al.*'s²¹ recommendation to consider stage three as an iterative process that includes regular team meetings to discuss study inclusion and exclusion at various stages of the study process.

Stage four: Charting the Data

To guide stage four¹, a data collection instrument will be generated by the research team to extract characteristics from the sample. We will extract data from all studies included in the scoping review. Sample characteristics will include, but not limited to: authorship, publication year, type of article (e.g. original study, commentary paper), study design, geographical origin of study or article, description of practice setting, type of social work practice activities, patient population characteristics, and treatment modalities. This form will be reviewed by the research team. Data extraction will be conducted by a graduate-level research assistant working under the supervision of lead investigator. Data will be extracted into a single Excel spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel software. Again, we will adopt Levac *et al.*'s²¹ recommendation that the research team collectively develop the data-charting form and together determine variables to extract from the data in order to best answer the research question.

Stage five: Data summary and synthesis of results

The focus of stage five¹ will be to provide a summary and synthesis of the results. This aligns with the purpose of scoping reviews to provide a map of concepts underpinning the research, key sources, and types of research²². Levac *et al.*²¹ suggest breaking stage five¹ into the following three smaller distinct steps: i) analysis; ii) reporting the results and deliver the outcome guiding the overall study purpose and research question; and iii) consider the meaning of the findings in relation to the study purpose and discuss potential implications that findings may have on future research, practice, and policy.

Dissemination and Ethics

This study will be the first step to developing practice guidelines for social workers providing mental health services in primary healthcare settings. Research ethics approval is not required given that we are collecting data from publicly available sources. Results of this scoping review study will be disseminated through a conference presentation and a peer-reviewed publication.

Contributions of Authors: RA, TK, JBB conceptualised and designed the study. RA wrote the initial study protocol which was then revised by TK and JBB. RA took the lead and compiled revisions. RA, TK, and JBB approved the final protocol manuscript and agree to be accountable to all aspects of the work.

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Data Sharing Statement: Dataset available by contacting the corresponding author.

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¹Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

²Department of Family Medicine, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, Western
University, London, ON, Canada

³School of Social Work, King’s University College, Western University, London, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Rachelle Ashcroft, PhD
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V4
Canada
Phone: 1-416-978-6314
Fax: 1-416-978-7072
Email: rachelle.ashcroft@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Introduction: Social work is a key member of interprofessional primary health care teams, and foundational to primary health care reforms that aim to improve the provision of mental health care. Little is known, however, about social work's scope of practice within primary health care settings, particularly in the provision of mental health care. The objective of this study is to identify and describe social work's scope of practice as it relates to mental health care in primary health care settings. **Methods and analysis:** A scoping review will be conducted using the methodology established by Arksey and O'Malley. We will search electronic databases (MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts) to identify studies appropriate for inclusion. One reviewer will independently screen all abstracts and full-text studies for inclusion, with supervision by lead investigator. We will include any study which focuses on social work and mental health care within primary health care settings. All bibliographic data, study characteristics, and range of social work practice activities will be collected and analysed using a tool developed by the research team. **Ethics and dissemination:** The scoping review will synthesise social work's scope of practice in the provision of mental health care within primary health care settings. This review will be the first step to formally develop guidelines for social work practice in primary health care. The results will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed publication and conference presentations.

Strengths and Limitations

- This will be the first scoping review study to identify social work’s scope of practice in the provision of primary mental health care
- Scoping reviews cover vast volume of literature and will provide a broad understanding of social work’s contribution to mental health care in primary care settings
- Inclusion criteria is limited to English and inclusive of all peer-reviewed publications
- No formal assessment of quality will be applied to articles included in this study

For peer review only

Introduction

There is strong international evidence that supports that the optimal location for responding to the growing population needs for prevention and management of mental health disorders resides in primary health care¹⁻³. The development and implementation of interprofessional primary health care teams has helped support Canadian and U.S. health care reform goals of improving access, quality of care, and availability of services to meet the needs of an increasingly complex patient population⁴⁻⁷. One approach to achieving health care reforms has been by strengthening interprofessional primary health care teams with the inclusion of mental health providers such as social work in order to enhance the availability, capacity, and quality of mental health care⁴⁻¹⁰.

As one of the few non-medical providers in primary health care, social work brings an expertise and philosophy that complements aims of primary health care practice, and skills for the provision of mental health care^{4,7,11}. Collaborative care interventions that include social work and other mental health providers can be highly effective in improving outcomes for primary health care patients with mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety^{2,12-16}. Although there has been a recent increase of social workers working in interprofessional primary health care team settings, greater clarity is needed to help social workers determine how to develop their role in order to effectively contribute to collaborative care interventions^{4,8}. Currently no practice guidelines exist that can provide clarity to social work in the provision of mental health care within primary health care settings. Scope of practice refers to the range of roles, functions, responsibilities, and activities which professionals are educated and authorized to perform¹⁷. Social workers in primary health care settings often provide care to diverse patient populations and engage in a broad range of practice areas that is inclusive, but not limited to mental health care⁴. Within primary health care settings, social workers provide care related to chronic disease,

geriatrics, palliative care, grief, trauma, parenting, and a multitude of psychosocial issues⁴. According to a recent study investigating social work’s emerging role in primary health care, mental health care is a core practice area with 96% of study participants indicating that they provided mental health care on a daily basis⁴. Although social workers in primary health care settings provide care to a diverse range of practice areas, our scoping review will focus on mental health care because it is a core practice area for social workers in primary health care settings⁴. Doing so will also help guide current healthcare reforms that are striving to enhance the capacity of primary mental health care⁴⁻⁷. By focusing solely on mental health care, our scoping review is not intended to minimize the importance of other areas of care in which social work is engaged. Identifying the current state of knowledge regarding social work’s scope of practice related to primary mental health care will help provide a foundation for the development of future practice guidelines.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this scoping review are to i) systematically scope the literature on social work, mental health, and primary health care; and ii) identify the range of roles, functions, responsibilities, and activities that social work is performing in order to describe social work’s scope of practice. This work will constitute the first step in the development of guidelines to support social work practice in primary health care. This information will help provide guidance to social workers and other leaders in primary health care in determining how social work’s scope of practice can best compliment the interprofessional team in helping to address demands for mental health care.

Methods and Analysis

Our study is employing scoping review methods to help provide a broader understanding of social work’s scope of practice in the provision of mental health care in primary health care

settings¹⁸. A scoping review is a method of knowledge synthesis that “addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting and synthesizing existing knowledge”^{19, p. 5}. Systematically mapping a subject field is particularly useful when literature on a topic is being compiled for the first time, when minimal literature exists for a particular topic, and/or when the investigation is examining a complex or non-homogeneous topic¹⁸⁻²⁰. Scoping reviews also provide an opportunity to identify key concepts, gaps in research, and evidence that can help guide practice and policymaking²⁰. Knowledge synthesis like scoping reviews are essential for advancing health care practices and can help knowledge users – in this case social workers – increase inclusion of efficient evidence-based decisions in practice¹⁹.

Following recommendations from Colquhoun *et al.*¹⁹, our methods for this study are based on a five-stage scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O’Malley¹⁸ and enhanced by Levac, Colquhoun, and O’Brien²¹. Five stages informing our review are: i) identifying the research question; ii) identifying relevant studies; iii) study selection; iv) charting the data; and v) data summary and synthesis of results¹⁸. We consider this an optimal framework for our current study due to the infancy of the subject matter and scarcity of evidence-based studies.

Stage one: Identifying the research question

Levac *et al.*²¹ recommend clarifying stage one¹⁸ by combining a broad research question with a clear scope of inquiry that defines the concept, target population, and relevant health outcomes in order to clarify the focus of the scoping review. Levac *et al.*²¹ also recommend developing the research question with the intended outcome of the scoping review in mind to help determine the purpose of the study. In this case, the purpose of our scoping review is to

provide clarity about social work’s scope of practice in the provision of primary mental health care that may help contribute to practice guidelines which are currently absent. Through consultation the research team has defined the research question as: “What is social work’s scope of practice in mental health care when working within primary health care settings?”.

Stage two: Identifying relevant studies

At stage two¹⁸, we seek to identify available literature on social work providing mental health care within primary health care settings. Levac *et al.*²¹ recommend strengthening stage two¹⁸ by assembling a suitable research team with combined content and methodological expertise to ensure successful completion of the scoping review. We have followed Levac *et al.*’s²¹ suggestion and have assembled a team that combines expertise in primary care (JB/RA), social work practice in health (JB/RA/TK), mental health care (JB/RA/TK), and scoping review methodology (RA/TK). We have also identified a graduate-level research assistant who will participate in all phases of the scoping review.

We have met with a health sciences librarian at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada to determine databases and keywords. Identification of studies relevant to this review will be achieved by searching the following databases: MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts. Search terms have been developed with input from the research team and consultation with an experienced research librarian. Database searches will combine terms from three themes: social work, primary health care, mental health. Search terms being used to identify relevant studies are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Search terms being used to identify relevant studies

Concepts	Search Terms
social work	social work*
primary health care	primary care, primary health care, medical home*, family physician*, family practice, family medicine, general practice, nurse practitioner*, physician*, doctor*
mental health	mental health, mental disorder*, mental illness*, common mental disorder*, anxiety, depression

Terms will be searched as keywords in the title, abstract, and subject headings as appropriate. Inclusion criteria guiding publication types acceptable for review is broad and inclusive of all peer-reviewed publications such as original research, case reports, literature reviews, technical guidelines, and commentary papers. Furthermore, inclusion criteria is limited to English language. No date limits will be applied. Search results will be downloaded and imported into RefWorks.

Stage three: Study selection

At stage three¹⁸, the review process will be comprised of two levels of screening: i) a title and abstract review; and ii) full-text review. For the first level of screening, the graduate-level research assistant – working under supervision of lead authors - will independently conduct title scans and abstract reviews to assess eligibility against inclusion criteria. Articles that are considered relevant will then be included in the full-text review. Any discordant full-text articles will be reviewed by both the research assistant and the lead investigator to determine if they meet inclusion/exclusion criteria. As well, any discordant full-text articles will be discussed with the second investigator until consensus decision is obtained.

Relevant studies will be assessed against the following inclusion criteria: i) the words social work, primary health care (inclusive of search terms), and mental (inclusive of search terms) are used in the title or abstract; ii) social work is a key focus of the article; iii) the article

focuses mainly on mental health care (inclusive of all types of mental health care except substance use); iii) primary health care (inclusive of search terms) is a main focus of the article. Any type of study design will be included, as well, commentary articles will also be included. We will follow Levac *et al.*'s²¹ recommendation to consider stage three as an iterative process that includes regular team meetings to discuss study inclusion and exclusion at various stages of the study process.

Stage four: Charting the data

To guide stage four¹⁸, a data collection instrument will be generated by the research team to extract characteristics from the sample. We will extract data from all studies included in the scoping review. Sample characteristics will include, but not limited to: authorship, publication year, type of article (e.g. original study, commentary paper), study design, geographical origin of study or article, description of practice setting, type of social work practice activities, patient population characteristics, and treatment modalities. This form will be reviewed by the research team. Data extraction will be conducted by a graduate-level research assistant working under the supervision of lead investigator. Data will be extracted into a single Excel spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel software. Again, we will adopt Levac *et al.*'s²¹ recommendation that the research team collectively develop the data-charting form and together determine variables to extract from the data in order to best answer the research question.

Stage five: Data summary and synthesis of results

The focus of stage five¹⁸ will be to provide a summary and synthesis of the results. This aligns with the purpose of scoping reviews to provide a map of concepts underpinning the research, key sources, and types of research²². Levac *et al.*²¹ suggest breaking stage five¹⁸ into the following three smaller distinct steps: i) analysis; ii) reporting the results and deliver the outcome guiding the overall study purpose and research question; and iii) consider the meaning

of the findings in relation to the study purpose and discuss potential implications that findings may have on future research, practice, and policy.

Dissemination and Ethics

This study will be the first step to developing practice guidelines for social workers providing mental health services in primary healthcare settings. Research ethics approval is not required given that we are collecting data from publicly available sources. Results of this scoping review study will be disseminated through a conference presentation that engages an audience of social work practitioners in primary health care and a peer-reviewed publication. All members of the research team have established relationships with social work and primary health care networks which will also be used to disseminate findings. Our aim is to use findings from this scoping review to help guide future research with social worker practitioners in primary health care to better understand how best to support them in the provision of quality mental health care.

Contributions of Authors: RA, TK, JBB conceptualised and designed the study. RA wrote the initial study protocol which was then revised by TK and JBB. RA took the lead and compiled revisions. RA, TK, and JBB approved the final protocol manuscript and agree to be accountable to all aspects of the work.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing Interests: No competing interests exist.

Data Sharing Statement: Dataset available by contacting the corresponding author.

References

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