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1A Identify situations where research may be required

Community services workers can use information to inform their work practices.

There are numerous situations where a community services worker may be required to seek out further information to support and improve their own work practice. Some examples are provided in the table below:

Purpose	Description
To compare approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Comparing different approaches or interventions helps determine which is most effective. ▶ For example, it may help identify which option is most appropriate in a specific setting, (e.g. rural, regional, urban).
To test a hypothesis ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A worker may have observed something in their workplace which suggests a relationship between two things. ▶ The worker may seek out further information about their hypothesis to determine whether it is correct.
To identify practice trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Practice trends are innovative and emerging practices that may have the potential to improve and enhance client outcomes. ▶ A worker might want to identify practice trends to keep up to date with the latest innovations in the field or investigate a specific practice trend to understand how it may impact their own work practice.
To extend knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A worker may need or want to extend their knowledge of an issue relating to their work practice. Perhaps they want to learn more about how to develop their understanding of working with a specific client group.

¹ A hypothesis is a statement which declares a relationship between two factors (e.g. X causes Y, X is related to Y).

It is important to note that seeking out existing information is not the only way community services workers can address issues. In some cases, undertaking additional training, or discussing issues with your supervisor or with your colleagues, will be more appropriate and efficient.

However, it may be that the questions you have cannot be sufficiently addressed via these methods. For example, you may not have access to the specific type of training you need, or your supervisor might not know the answer to your question. It would therefore be reasonable to research existing information on an issue or problem related to your work.



The CRAAP test

This short acronym may help inform your credibility assessment.

Currency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ When was the information published? ▶ Is there a more recent publication that supports or refutes the original?
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Is it pitched for a scholarly audience? ▶ Have you looked at a variety of sources before selecting this one?
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What are the author's qualifications? ▶ Has the resource been cited in other research?
Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Does the research contain sufficient evidence to back it up? ▶ Has the publication been through a peer-review process? ▶ Are there grammatical or spelling errors?
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Why was the resource developed? Was it developed to inform and provide facts to the audience, or rather to sell something? ▶ Is there evidence of political, religious or personal bias? ▶ Is the information objective and impartial?

Example

Identify and access credible sources of evidence

Aldo is a youth worker looking for information about supporting young people's mental health through mobile phone apps. He has identified the major concepts relating to his topic and has started to look for relevant information.

Aldo finds a report published online by three academics from an overseas institution. The report describes a research project undertaken to assess the effectiveness of a specific mobile phone app. However, the authors credentials are not provided, and the report is posted on a page that is advertising the company that sells the app. The report has an unusual structure – with no abstract and a very limited reference list. Based on these factors, Aldo decides that the report is not a credible source.



Summary

- ▶ Secondary research uses data or research that has already been collected or undertaken by someone else for the purposes of analysis.
- ▶ The main reasons why community services workers undertake secondary research are to compare approaches, test a hypothesis, identify practice trends and extend their knowledge.
- ▶ Practice trends are innovative and emerging practices that have the potential to improve and enhance clients' outcomes.
- ▶ Specific guidelines in Australia have been developed to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities benefit from research that involves them.
- ▶ The process of establishing and defining a research objective involves narrowing the focus of a problem or issue and then clarifying the problem or issue.
- ▶ A research objective should be specific, concise and include an appropriate research-related verb (e.g. investigate, examine, etc.).
- ▶ Credible sources are unbiased, authored by people with relevant credentials, current, in-depth, comprehensive and accurate.
- ▶ Using credible sources and evidence-based practices helps to ensure services are fulfilling their duty of care.
- ▶ Evidence-based practice is practice that is informed and guided by best quality evidence, however there are differing views about what constitutes 'best quality evidence.'
- ▶ Randomised controlled trials generate 'gold standard' evidence however they are difficult to undertake in community services settings.

Identify relevant publications first is more efficient than identifying irrelevant ones, because determining potential relevance is difficult at first glance compared to determining definite irrelevance. During the complex and demanding searching process, you wish to avoid accidentally discarding a relevant publication.

For the purposes of a work-based exercise conducted by somebody with limited experience of systematic searching, you should aim to end up with no more than 20 relevant publications. In general, the more publications you must analyse, the longer the analysis will take.

Prioritising information according to need

Starting with the most useful information ensures you spend more time on quality research.

During your search, you may find that you are identifying hundreds of relevant publications. If this is the case, you may need to limit the scope of your search. Alternatively, you could organise the publications into groups according to their relevance, and then use the most relevant group of publications for your analysis.

The process of grouping publications according to relevance may be challenging, because it can be difficult to determine what makes one publication more relevant than another. One way you can do this is to determine which subgroup or issue related to your objective has the greatest need: known as 'prioritising information according to need'.

For example, a worker who provides services to socially isolated elderly people undertakes a search for information relating to effective interventions for this population: she identifies 150 relevant publications. It is not possible for her to review the title and abstracts of all 150 publications.

However, the worker also knows that the most socially isolated elderly people in her community are those from non-English speaking backgrounds. She then prioritises the information and picks out those publications that relate specifically to elderly people from non-English speaking backgrounds, which means she now has 17 publications to analyse.

This approach is not standard practice for the purposes of secondary research, because the information you end up analysing does not match your original objective. However, it is one way of adapting the process of secondary research to make it more feasible for people whose primary role is not research and workers who have a range of other time constraints.

Example

Establish relevance of information according to objectives, work requirements and needs

Rohinton works as a childcare worker in an early learning centre. He undertakes a search to identify information describing the most effective ways of ensuring children transition smoothly from early childhood to school settings.

Rohinton has identified a total of 70 potentially relevant publications and reviews the titles and abstracts of each. He discards three publications that were published prior to 1990 as well as two publications that refer exclusively to developing countries. Upon reviewing the abstracts, he discards a further two that describe interventions deliverable only by specialists. This leaves him with 63 potentially relevant publications, which is an unfeasible number to review

He has noticed that the children at his centre who struggle most with transitioning to school are those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and discovers that 12 publications relate specifically to that population. Rohinton saves those 12 publications to Endnote in order to undertake his analysis.

If there is no consensus, you might be able to note patterns within the data.

For example, perhaps you identify 47 useful publications and group them according to the following patterns:

- ▶ 9 publications conclude that a specific intervention is highly effective.
- ▶ 8 publications conclude that a specific intervention is only slightly effective.
- ▶ 2 publications conclude that there is not enough evidence to indicate whether that specific intervention is effective or not.

If you compare these three groups of publications, can you identify any patterns? For example, perhaps the first group of 9 publications were undertaken with adults in a residential setting, whereas the second group of 8 were undertaken with teenagers in a community-based setting. Perhaps the final group of 2 publications was published 5 years prior to the others. This would be highly relevant to your conclusions.

It doesn't matter if there is a consensus or not: what matters is that you are able to *identify* whether any consensus exists by comparing your findings.

You may also consider the arguments and theories the authors put forward about *why* they got the results they did and their implications. These arguments and theories are usually included in the 'Discussion' and 'Conclusion' sections of a research publication.

When you compare the arguments and theories asserted, you're looking for agreements or disagreements among all the publications. Here are some of the arguments and theories the authors put to explain their findings:

Findings	Arguments and theories
An intervention or approach is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ effective ▶ brings about positive outcomes or ▶ shows promise 	The intervention or approach shows promise because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ it aligns with client's values ▶ it is appropriate and relevant to client's needs and circumstances ▶ it enhances a relationship of trust between worker and client.
An intervention is ineffective	The intervention or approach is ineffective because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ it's not appropriate for a specific subgroup of the population (e.g. young children, non-English speakers, etc.) ▶ it doesn't work in specific circumstances (e.g. remote areas).
An intervention is harmful	The intervention or approach is harmful because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ it exposes clients to risks ▶ it undermines client's physical or mental health ▶ it undermines client's cultural safety.
What needs to be done to address a problem or issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ More resources are required (e.g. funding, training, staff, etc.). ▶ A change in practice or service delivery is required. ▶ More research is required to better understand the problem/issue.

Your focus on areas for change should concern your own work practice; after all, improving your own work practice was the ultimate goal of your search. However, you might decide that there are also broader issues to address – such as organisational practices.

It is important to remember that at this stage you are proposing *potential* areas for change. Don't stress over what might be required to implement these changes; this is covered in section 4.2.

Example

Apply the findings of research to current work practice

Yasin has undertaken a search to identify information that will help him engage with young homeless people. He finds that there are three main factors that influence young homeless people's engagement with outreach services:

- ▶ lack of trust in services
- ▶ fear of police involvement
- ▶ perception that services cannot meet their needs

Based on these findings, Yasin identifies two potential areas for change in his current work practice. This includes:

- ▶ adapting his approach when interacting with young homeless people by:
 - reassuring them of his role and emphasizing that he is not involved with law enforcement
 - explaining the specific support his organisation can provide to young people
- ▶ developing methods for building trusting relationships with young homeless people, such as establishing relationships with local organisations used and trusted by young homeless people.

Example

Apply the findings of research to current work practice

David has analysed publications that describe the impact therapy dogs have on participation in adult group therapy programs. He finds:

- ▶ some evidence to indicate that therapy dogs do increase adult participation in group therapy if a program runs for at least 8 weeks and the same therapy dog is present at every session
- ▶ some evidence indicating that therapy dogs have no impact upon the participation of adults in group support programs.

Based on these findings, David identifies two potential areas for change in his current work practice:

- ▶ Trial the use of a therapy dog, as there is some evidence to indicate that it is effective.
- ▶ Undertake an evaluation of the trial to build upon the existing contradictory body of knowledge.



Summary

- ▶ Information contained in a body of information can be used in different ways.
- ▶ Potential areas for change and actions must be based on the findings of the analysis.
- ▶ When deciding upon potential areas for change and actions, it is important for a worker to draw upon their own practice knowledge to ensure decisions are feasible and appropriate within their current work environment.
- ▶ Actions must be concrete. They should focus on what the worker will do.
- ▶ It is useful for actions to have a deadline; this encourages the completion of tasks.
- ▶ Most researchers find that further research or evaluation is often beneficial.
- ▶ Even if no changes to practice are required, there may be actions to undertake, such as presenting the findings of the research to colleagues.
- ▶ The SMART acronym is a useful tool when developing actions based upon the outcomes of research.