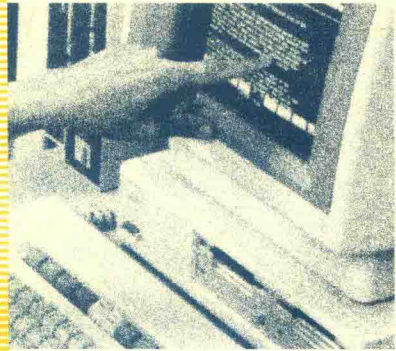


HUMAN SERVICES

PRACTICE, EVALUATION,

and

COMPUTERS



A Practical Guide for Today and Beyond

Paula S. Nurius/Walter W. Hudson

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**HUMAN SERVICES
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Foreword

As you begin reading this book, you are embarking on an adventuresome journey into new frontiers of social work practice. The territory to be explored—computer-assisted social work practice—may appear to you, as it did to me, not only challenging and formidable but (let's face it!) ominous and overwhelming. Fortunately, your expert guides on this expedition are natives to social work who have thoroughly traversed the new terrain, understand your fears, possess experience-based knowledge of the complexities of social work practice, and are willing to move at a pace that matches your inclination and level of expertise (or ignorance) about how to use computers.

As Nurius and Hudson walk you through the many possible uses of a computer, tracking a case from intake to case closure, I suspect you will be as excited as I was as I pondered the many ways in which a computer could facilitate accomplishment of the various tasks entailed in this complex process. I began to think of the computer as a friend (miracles do happen) rather than as a foreboding alien—a friend willing to share in the completion of many burdensome tasks and able to enhance the delivery of services.

My newfound optimism was more than justified as I read about how using the computer could partially liberate social workers from the clutch of the “paperwork monster.” By completing forms, billing, and printing out standard letters that would otherwise entail starting from scratch each time, the computer can assume many of the routine functions that consume practitioners' time. Moreover, the authors explain, a computer can be used as a decision-support tool to ensure that social workers don't overlook an important resource needed by the client—a crucial matter in case management.

In the first chapters, the authors also provide other stimulating possibilities for use of computers in social work practice, including keeping casenotes, monitoring progress, discharge planning, acquiring skills, communicating with disabled persons, evaluating practice, and participating in telecommunication networks to keep abreast of the burgeoning knowledge in the profession. Subsequent chapters delineate the “how” of using the computer to facilitate accomplishment of these basic tasks.

One of the many strengths of this book is its interactive feature. Rather than merely reading about how computers can be used, readers actually learn to use them in a painless fashion. By following the explicit directions provided by the authors and using the computer diskettes that accompany the book, readers engage in hands-on exercises that enable them to accomplish many of the tasks listed above. This experience is enormously empowering to those of us who have had computer-phobia and have been reluctant to “learn new tricks.” (I succeeded for a protracted time in resisting learning to use a computer—even a word processor—and it was only through a colleague’s persistent urging and nurturant tutoring that I finally took the risk. Now I wonder how I survived without my faithful friend—my computer!)

The authors do not limit their discussion of computer use to applications in direct practice. Social workers in middle management will discover exciting uses of the computer not only for program evaluation, but also for bridging the gap between micro and macro practice. Administrators will be stimulated to seriously consider suggestions that can help achieve agency and program objectives in more efficient and cost effective ways. Moreover, service delivery and staff morale may be raised, and burnout lowered, when administrators implement some of the suggestions for freeing professional staff from performing routine tasks that can be completed more rapidly and efficiently by computers.

A detailed summary of the book’s contents may be found in the Preface. Suffice it for me to say that this text goes far beyond the work-saving functions of computers. The authors explain how to use a computer for designing effective practice, using various measures for assessment purposes, and designing your own measures. With respect to assessment, one of the outstanding features of the book is the inclusion of 22 CASS measures, which social workers will find invaluable and easy to use in assessing the problems of clients. It will be (or should be) just a short time before the majority of direct practitioners employ these scales. The result will be more accurate and more comprehensive assessments.

Lest some readers conclude that the authors may be doing a hard sell on the use of computers, let me allay their concerns. Not only do the authors present cautions and identify disadvantages of using computers, they also present guidelines for avoiding needless problems and minimizing the disadvantages.

Computer-assisted practice is the wave of the future. The question confronting us is not *whether* it will happen but *when*. The challenge for us is to exploit rather than resist the technology currently available to us in the interest of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of social work practice.

—Dean Hepworth

Preface

In *Human Services Practice, Evaluation, and Computers*, we present a uniquely integrated approach to computer-aided practice by combining tools from the domains of direct practice, research and evaluation, and computer science. Our goal has been to embed traditionally separate topics—such as measurement, evaluation, critical thinking skills, and computer literacy—in the context of practice values and tasks to help foster creative, integrative approaches to contemporary questions.

We present many ways to employ computer tools in assessing client problems, including guidelines for weighing the appropriateness of such use in the assessment of client groups and problem types. We also describe tools that facilitate repetitive problem assessments, so that you and your clients can keep close tabs on the progress that is made over time.

Additional components of practice that we address include computer aids for the following:

- keeping client records and notes readily available (even from varied sources)
- administering social histories and many other types of clinical questionnaires and screening devices
- conducting clinical interviews
- administering and scoring mental status tests and other evaluative examinations

We will also speak to using technology to better bridge the information needs and uses of the micropractitioner (direct service provider) and the macropractitioner (administrator).

To the Reader

Some of you will find it hard to believe that you are reading a book about the everyday use of computers in direct social service practice. Others will find it an obvious component of your professional training. Many of you may experience some degree of discord: intellectually appreciating the need for training, yet emotionally aware that your vision of yourself as a clinician or counselor never included a computer.

We are certainly aware of these mixed sentiments. We are also acutely aware of the mixed picture in social agencies today about how, in what form, and through what means computer technology is being introduced. The considerable range of sentiments, perspectives, and operating reality of technology in practice makes our writing task an exceptionally challenging one. Yet, it is *because* of this unevenness and complexity, rather than in spite of it, that we undertook this book.

Evolution of Social Services

The social services are in the midst of a technological evolution. As in many other domains of our lives, computers are becoming an increasingly standard fixture. The speed, magnitude, and form of this transformation varies enormously. And although the situation is slowly changing, we presently have few guides for how to shape the use of technology to the needs and realities of practice.

Our initial approach was to offer a tool that would “fix” this problem—a computer system designed for and sensitive to the needs of direct practice in social agencies. But, in reality, this is just the first step. Your challenge is to learn how to apply this tool, how to develop solutions to your individual and organizational dilemmas, and how to generate creative applications. A detailed manual about how to make this tool do what you want is one essential element (and that is included here in the software), but no manual can guide you in how to conceptualize and properly govern the evolution of practice in this age of computers.

In light of this, we have attempted to develop a new kind of resource. We offer tools—principles, methods, and applications—with which to develop your own answers. In classroom and field-based training, these topics are often taught separately. In our own schools, we teach courses in these separate areas on a regular basis. And we have watched the struggle of our students and practitioner colleagues as they try to integrate content from seemingly disparate areas into solutions they can apply in everyday work life. This separation has fostered false forced-choice kinds of conceptualizations

such as research *or* practice, mechanical computer approach *or* warm humane approach. In this book, we provide practical assistance toward achieving a more integrative perspective in the classroom and agency alike. We hope that this will help reduce the barriers and foster integration of the tools and concepts that are ingredients for practice in the twenty-first century.

An Ongoing Process

Although empowering, the task of integration and solution development may be frustrating at times. The challenges of incorporating computer supports into the conduct of direct practice may not be immediately rewarding, yet they will significantly affect practice. We hope to help bridge gaps and provide resources with which to understand, use, modify, and create technological aids to practice questions and needs. This is an ongoing and iterative process—we are still building the solid professional knowledge base needed to understand what types and forms of computer supports result in better services, in smoother agency functioning, and in appropriate safeguards. The need to expand that knowledge base points to an enormous research agenda for all of us. We have learned a great deal along the way from conversations and work with our students and practitioner colleagues, and we look forward to this continued cross-pollination. So, if you have comments or suggestions—write us!

As you will see from our concerns and our approach to the task of incorporating computers into practice, we have worked hard in this book to avoid making promises or offering easy solutions. We hope the tools, conceptions, and perspectives of this book will assist you to realize and enjoy the potentials and possibilities that can be achieved with your computer.

Organization of the Book

The following will give you some guidance about the structure and use of the materials to follow.

Chapter 1: Introduction presents a snapshot of both the potential benefits and drawbacks of computer-assisted practice and also helps you get oriented to the CASS software (Computer-Assisted Social Services) that comes with this book.

Chapter 2: Computers in Practice: A Complex Spectrum illustrates the use of the computer across different practice tasks with examples from various types of service settings and client populations. Some involve large-scale

activities that bear greatly upon practice, including the need to bridge the micro-macro spectrum of practitioner, supervisory, and management responsibilities.

Chapter 3: Paperwork in Practice: The Understated Backbone provides detailed instruction in the use of the computer for the handling of forms, letters, notes, and information-gathering and -distribution activities that we all know as “paperwork.” This also includes client questionnaires, social histories, and interview recordings, as well as intake interviews, clinical questionnaires, and job interviews.

Chapter 4: Casenotes and Other Paperwork Functions discusses applications that facilitate writing and managing casenotes and provides guidelines for structuring casenote recording for best use within your own practice. The chapter also discusses handling of other types of managerial paperwork, such as service reports, work activity sheets, monthly business expense sheets, and monthly field visit reports.

Chapter 5: Practice Judgment: Considerations and Tools is the first of two chapters devoted to a conceptual base for the partnership of scientific principles and computer technology with practice. Chapter 5 is largely nontechnical and focuses on such essential topics as the natural strengths and limitations of practice observations, inference, reasoning, and judgment—including the ability to conceive of one’s practice in terms of its varied components. Also addressed are key practice questions that cut across fields of practice and some of the methodological and technological tools to help address these questions on an ongoing basis.

Chapter 6: Designing for Effectiveness-Oriented Practice is a more technical chapter, devoted to the flexible and creative use of practice or service designs that help answer a range of evaluative questions. We suggest a multi-tiered approach that takes into account both the developmental phase of the agency and the type of service context. Chapter 6 is designed to present a combination of conceptual, methodological, and technological materials to consider in addressing practice questions. It also begins explicitly articulating constructive ties between the practice questions of the micropractitioner and the macropractitioner.

Chapter 7: The Role of Measurement in Practice provides a nontechnical introduction to the use of measurement tools for the assessment of client problems and the evaluation of practice. It discusses the rationale for using formal measurement tools, the meaning of “measurement,” the concepts of reliability and validity, defining client problems in measurable terms, and fundamental psychometric issues in client problem assessment. This chapter is essential to gaining a conceptual backdrop for the “how” and “why” questions of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation in interpersonal

practice, and subsequent consideration of how the computer can assist these practice tasks.

Chapter 8: A Sampler of Standardized Measures For Use In Practice does two things: It describes the CASS assessment scales (more than 20 of them) that are contained in the software provided with this book, and it explains how to use them. Basic psychometric information is provided about each of the scales as well as brief instructions concerning the interpretation and use of obtained scores. In addition to providing specific tools, this chapter models the kinds of information you would seek about assessment tools as well as factors you should consider in generating clinical interpretations.

Chapter 9: Questions About Using Assessment Scales presents and answers many questions about the use, scoring, administration, and interpretation of the CASS scales described in Chapter 8. It thereby represents a context-laden discussion of professional uses of assessment scales. Chapter 9 will be very useful to your work with all assessment scales (standardized scales and scales that you may create for use with your clients) because many of these questions reflect broad-based service, counseling, and clinical issues.

Chapter 10: Designing Your Own Measures provides specific guidance as to how to construct your own measurement tool when a standardized assessment scale is not adequate or available. It covers the construction of single-item scales, multi-item unidimensional scales, multi-item multidimensional scales, checklists, goal attainment scales, rating scales, and self-anchored scales. This chapter also emphasizes the distinction between a “test” and a “scale” and provides instruction on their use and construction. The chapter will be of special interest to school counselors, psychologists, vocational specialists, and drug rehabilitation workers in a variety of settings.

Chapter 11: Aggregating Single-Case Data for Administrative Use discusses options for using the computer as a macropractice tool within a service effectiveness framework, including possibilities for interface with other software packages (such as database management systems). This is the first of two chapters that address the need to build bridges across micro-macro spheres of the human service organization. Chapter 11 also highlights a special feature of the CASS program that enables you to prepare client records for uploading into statistical packages, spreadsheet programs, and database management systems.

Chapter 12: A Method for Aggregating Single-Case Data describes an approach to data aggregation in settings with heavy use of elementary single-case designs to monitor and evaluate client progress. It provides background rationale along with a number of technical considerations and then describes the use of one software system that conducts single-case aggregations using client records that are produced by the CASS software.

Chapter 13: Concluding Notes discusses scenarios for the possible future uses of computers in professional practice. It offers specific suggestions as to how to proceed beyond the materials presented in *Human Services Practice, Evaluation, and Computers*.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: The CASS Scales contains paper-and-pencil versions of all the short-form assessment scales contained in your copy of the CASS program so that you can study them as you read the chapters that deal with their use. Examination of the paper-and-pencil versions may also assist you in deciding which of them will be most appropriate for you to use.

Appendix 2: Scoring the CASS Scales presents step-by-step procedures for scoring paper-and-pencil versions of the CASS scales so that they can be used when computer scoring is not possible or feasible. You should read this appendix carefully in order to carry out manual scoring when that is needed and also to understand what the computer is actually doing for you.

Appendix 3: Special Order Forms contains forms and instructions to obtain supplementary materials should you decide to acquire them.

Appendix 4: The CASS Menu Tree Structure is designed to help you navigate through the CASS software included in this book.

Appendix 5: Installation and Configuration contains brief instructions on setting up your computer to run the CASS software. These instructions are also available in the User's Manual on the CASS disks.

THE COMPUTER-ASSISTED SOCIAL SERVICES (CASS) SYSTEM SOFTWARE



The software included with this text is a student version of the Computer Assisted Social Services, or CASS system. It is a comprehensive, flexible practice management and assessment tool you can use to learn about computer-assisted practice applications we shall discuss and illustrate.

Sections of the text that require access to a computer—either to perform computer exercises or to read the User's Manual—are highlighted with a disk icon to help you plan your study time.

The CASS software requires an IBM or compatible computer with a hard disk, 640K of memory, a 3.5" drive, and DOS 3.1 or later. If your computer does not accept 3.5" diskettes, you can acquire 5.25" diskettes using the form on page 425 of Appendix 3.

Acknowledgments

Before turning to the book, we would like to express appreciation to many who have supported and aided us along the way in writing this book and in developing the software that is included within it. The conversations in classrooms, computer labs, conferences, workshops, meetings, and hallways are too numerous to mention but have provided a wellspring of input and feedback. We have benefited from very thoughtful and thought-provoking input from several colleagues in particular, including Denise Bronson, Ohio State University; William Butterfield, Washington University (St. Louis, MO); and Wallace Gingerich, Case Western Reserve University. We also thank Jani Semke, University of Washington, and the deans and office staff of our respective universities for their support. Peggy Adams, our editor; Carol Lombardi, our production editor; and the entire Wadsworth team have all been wonderfully encouraging as we lumbered through the process from prospectus to production. Our families have been more than a little patient as we (repeatedly) alternated between euphoria and teeth-gnashing.

And, finally, we would like to acknowledge each other for persevering through differences in work style and perspective—and through similarities in stubbornness—to see “the other side of the coin” the other offered. If we do say so ourselves, we came up with a most effective incentive system, based on espresso and chocolate, that we highly recommend!

—Paula S. Nurius
University of Washington

—Walter W. Hudson
Arizona State University

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