TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Research Design in Social Work

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Anne Campbell, Brian J. Taylor & Anne McGlade

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TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Using case studies, activities, research summaries and more, this highly practical book is an essential guide for all undergraduate and postgraduate social work students wanting to make the best start on their research journey.

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Research Design in Social Work

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Introduction

The undertaking of an empirical research project at undergraduate or postgraduate level is a difficult but rewarding task which empowers the candidate through a development of her research skills and knowledge, whilst generating new and important research findings for the social work profession. However, the multi-level knowledge exchange reaches far beyond the bolstering of academic and practice knowledge. Indeed in many cases, the undergraduate/postgraduate researcher produces findings which improve an aspect of service provision and ultimately make a difference to the lives of service users, carers, families and communities.

The following chapters aim to encourage potential researchers to take up the positive and reciprocally rewarding challenge of taking a research idea and formulating a project to realise a change in practice policy or procedure. Invariably, the research idea is most often rooted in the prospective researcher's deep passion for change or as a result of their discovery of a gap in the literature or to inform practice at a local or regional level.

However, the passion for research is often dampened somewhat when the student is faced with the myriad of research paradigms, approaches and methodologies which they must navigate at the beginning of the often long and arduous, but eventually satisfying, research journey.

Subsequent to the choosing of the research subject, students are also faced with a plethora of tasks, including choosing the appropriate research methodology and negotiating the many associated sampling techniques. They must then consider a range of data analysis frameworks and the task of concisely summarising the information in a readable and coherent format.

Stages of the research process

Choice of research topic

The cyclical and iterative process of the research journey begins with the choice of project subject area. This is often influenced by the student's fervency for a specific area of practice or as a result of a lack of specific information on the efficacy of an intervention with a certain service user group or the effects of a recent regional policy on service provision. For example, a recent project considered the efficacy of a systemic family therapy programme in practice with juvenile offenders and their families. The project title was selected due to the research student's work interest in the area and his practice knowledge of what he perceived as the efficacy of the project aims and objectives. Another example

demonstrated the student researcher's interest in the area of social work placement provision. The student chose to consider the undergraduate social work perceptions of voluntary sector placements in comparison with statutory placements in a social work degree programme. In both cases, the researchers chose subjects which piqued their interest as a result of personal practice experience and provided an impetus and added enthusiasm for the research path that lay ahead.

Some points to remember when choosing a topic

1. Choose a subject that interests you otherwise it may prove difficult to sustain the momentum.
2. Select an area where other research has been carried out as it will provide a context to your project whilst providing enough research and additional literature to substantiate your discussion.
3. Do not choose a research question that is too wide – for example, how do older people cope with bereavement? Rather focus the title to how do older people cope with isolation in the short term following the death of a partner/spouse? Or, what service provision is available for older people to address loneliness in the aftermath of a partner bereavement?
4. How will the research add to the body of knowledge in this subject area and how may it be considered within the context of national and international research findings?

See **Chapter 2** for further discussion on types of study question and the strengths and appropriateness of different research designs for a range of research questions.

Literature review

The literature review is a core component of the research process as it lays the theoretical and policy foundation for the subject of study whilst substantiating the rationale for choice of the subject area. It must be clearly structured from the outset and follow a specific search strategy as explained in Chapter 1.

The findings from relevant studies should be analysed and arranged according to themes and sub-themes that emanate from the data and not simply reported in a regimental fashion. In addition, a summary of findings should be presented and linked specifically to the aims and objectives of the student research project. Over the years of supervising students, it has become clear that those individuals who take the time to sift through the data in a meaningful fashion and extract the themes accordingly tend to have a better grasp of the research objectives and relative research design.

See **Chapter 1** for further analysis of the formulation and creation of a literature review that is relevant to the subject area and how to present the review in a coherent framework.

Research design

The design should follow very clearly from the research aim and objectives. The aim should be clear and the objectives linked specifically to the methodology. How will each objective be directly translated to a strand of the methodological approach?

If you are selecting a qualitative approach, state clearly how this will meet the particular objectives and how the tools chosen will gather data that is relevant to your objectives. For example, how will data gathered from focus groups illuminate your research aim or how will findings from semi-structured interviews provide you with the necessary data to build your findings and discussion in a meaningful fashion?

Likewise, if you are choosing a quantitative approach, select a research tool which will gather data that will be useful at the analysis phase. This may appear to be a common-sense approach but some students compile a questionnaire and do not think about how the data it generates will be analysed or what findings it will produce to answer the research question. For example, one recent student constructed a questionnaire and realised that she had collected a series of prose-like answers that did not equate with her original objective of rating her respondents' views on alcohol and mental health. Therefore, she was unable to consider associations between, for example, the respondents' length of time in post and their views on daily recommended amounts (the latter variable should have used ranked data such as disagree/unsure/agree rather than an open-ended question).

Some points to remember in research design

1. Remember to clearly delineate between the research objectives and the methodology as outlined above.
2. State whether the research is qualitative, quantitative or employs a mixed methodological approach.
3. Choose your research tools carefully as they will dictate the type of data that you will generate.
4. Think ahead to the analysis stage now. It is crucial that you are left with data that is manageable and clearly provides information which will meet the needs of the research objectives.

Chapters 2, 4 and **5** will clearly demonstrate how this can be done via the provision of a rationale for choice of design, discussion of a number of methodological approaches and the research tools relevant to the chosen method.

Sampling

Linked to the section above, the correct sampling technique will also have a strong influence on the validity of the data gathered. If you have chosen a qualitative methodology, did you select non-probability sampling? Was it convenience or purposive or event sampling? How does this impact on the suitability of the data gathered and how will this be reported in the sampling section of your methodology?

Some points to remember in sampling

1. Choose the correct sampling procedure according to methodological approach.
2. Be specific about the sampling technique and make clear reference to it with relevant material to corroborate the choice of sampling method.
3. Articulate how the sampling method will be conducted and how this will impact on the potential research participants.

Chapter 3 provides an outline of a number of sampling techniques which are utilised widely by students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The overview shows how the various techniques are incorporated into the research design in a pragmatic fashion.

Data analysis

The analysis process can often be quite daunting for the novice researcher and students are sometimes left feeling adrift in the multitude of data analysis frameworks that are available to them. It may also be difficult to specify how and why a data analysis technique has been chosen and why it is most fitting for the data collected.

The gathering and subsequent analysis of qualitative data can often be perceived as a less onerous and more easily managed option for analysis in comparison with quantitative analysis. However, qualitative data analysis is as involved and complex as quantitative analysis and is a lengthy and detailed process. Early career researchers also often remark that whilst there is a plethora of literature on the theory of qualitative analysis and the conceptual underpinning of the work, it is quite difficult to locate a 'how to' guide in relation to the various stages of thematic analysis for exploratory qualitative research (which is largely what students utilise in their first forays into qualitative research methods and analysis). An example of a straightforward and easy to access guide is offered by Philip Burnard (1991); he presents a framework for thematic analysis and a step-by-step pathway to the process of conducting qualitative data analysis with interview transcripts.

Chapter 5 focuses on the analysis of qualitative data in audit and research evaluation projects derived from interviews and focus groups. The focus is basic thematic analysis which underpins a number of methods of qualitative data analysis.

Quantitative data analysis requires a set of skills which are not necessarily premised on mathematical prowess but rather on the use of logic and pragmatism. The majority of candidates who use quantitative methods for undergraduate or postgraduate projects learn to use a statistical package (most commonly SPSS) and produce a series of graphs and tables to provide a visual representation of the data alongside statistical tests which consider association between variables and, in some cases, the differences in values/scores (see Chapter 6).

Chapter 7 considers a basic level of quantitative data analysis which uses the SPSS package to house and analyse the data. The chapter includes a discussion on the production of charts and graphs, measures of central tendency and dispersion, tests for association and tests of mean scores most commonly used in small-scale research reports.

Reporting of findings

Findings must be reported in a legible and concise format and be contextualised within a logical and coherent structure. The reader should be able to follow a clear sequencing of findings and to locate a certain theme or subheading within the results easily, without having to wade through swathes of irrelevant text or description. On occasions, some student researchers may veer off on specific tangents and lose sight of the objectives. Whilst it is expected that a number of findings may arise that were not originally intended, it is good practice to make sure you have addressed your intended research objectives via the first draft of the findings. You may then incorporate the additional results that have been highlighted as a corollary of the research process.

Some points to remember in the reporting of findings

1. It is a good idea to reiterate the objectives at the beginning of the findings section to remind yourself and the reader of the primary purpose of the research.
2. Do not report the findings incrementally according to *each* question in the survey, focus group or semi-structured interview schedule but instead try to follow the initial structure outlined within your aims and objectives at the beginning of the project.
3. Try to avoid the discussion of other project findings within your results section and maintain a focus on a clear synopsis of the findings from your project.
4. Clearly label figures and tables in the findings section and keep heading fonts consistent throughout the text.
5. Do not insert tables/figures without supportive discussion as this engenders a disjointed presentation without clarity and explanation.
6. In reporting quantitative findings highlight percentages followed by numbers 20% (n=132) and follow the guidelines in statistical manuals for the reporting of results from statistical tests (for example, see Pallant, 2013).
7. In the reporting of qualitative data, remember to italicise the direct quotations, indent and provide a code for each excerpt.

Contextualising the findings

The findings should be set within a firm literary and evidence-based framework which will provide an analytical discussion of some of the key points in the findings section. Select a number of key points from the findings section and make note of them in a separate file. Consult research and extant literature from your literature review section and any additional relevant material that you may have gathered in the interim. Subsequently, read your findings again in the light of the literature that you have gathered and make notes as to whether any of your findings are substantiated or refuted by the key literature points. Next, try to contextualise your findings with those from the literature review and do try to provide a reflective analysis of the points made. Begin by describing one key finding and then discuss similar findings from one or possibly two other studies (see below). Repeat the process until you have created a strong thematic framework in which your key findings are presented within an analytical discussion.

Some points to remember in contextualising the findings

1. Use up-to-date sources to showcase your findings in a corroborative and relevant knowledge base. Choose findings from research projects which are no more than ten years old. However, other literary sources such as key texts or historical legislative/policy documents may be drawn from older sources.
2. As outlined in other sections, plan the structure of this chapter in advance and prepare to write with a clear idea of how you wish to proceed without meandering too much from the points you are trying to make.

Chapter 9 guides the reader in a consideration of the *discussion* and *conclusions* sections of their report or oral presentation. There is a helpful guide of how to extrapolate the primary findings and also how to outline the limitations of the study. There are also some very useful tips about how to link the study findings to contextual factors such as law, policy, standards and service development strategies.

Presenting the report

The presentation of the report is crucial to how the findings and discussion (and indeed all the components of the report) are viewed. The reader does not think about the author's agonising months of trawling through literature, formulating interview or survey questions, conducting the field work, transcribing, inputting, analysing and writing up. They are concerned only with the research product and are expecting an articulate read with concise points of summary and conclusion.

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