THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

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Preface

There has been tremendous progress by social work professionals and educators in building the profession's research infrastructure. There are now national research centers, federal and foundation research initiatives, institutional support, and dissemination efforts by organizations such as the Council on Social Work Education and the Society for Social Work Research. These accomplishments provide new opportunities for social work graduates and make your research training even more critical.

Whether you are eager to take an introductory course in social work research or you are wondering why you have to take this class as all you want to do is work with people, we hope that by the end of the course, you will understand how important research is—how it can contribute to your understanding of social problems, the human condition, and to micro and macro practice. We use different examples such as domestic violence, homelessness, poverty, child welfare, and aging that cut across the domains of social work practice.

By the end of this book, you should have the skills necessary to critically evaluate the research articles that you read across all your social work courses. You should not just accept findings because they appear in print; rather, you will learn to ask many questions before concluding that research-based conclusions are appropriate. What did the researchers set out to investigate? How were people selected for study? What information was collected, and how was it analyzed? Can the findings be applied to populations not part of the study? To different settings? Communities?

Another goal of this book is to prepare you to actually evaluate social work practice. The various examples demonstrate the methods used by social work researchers to discover the efficacy of interventions, to identify needs, and to test the impact of social policies. Evaluation is a key component of social work practice; it is through evaluation that we determine the efficacy of work with individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Achieving these goals will provide a foundation for evidence-based practice. As part of evidence-based practice it is imperative that you are able to locate research, understand research findings, and critique the quality of the research. You will also need to assess the applicability of the findings for diverse people.

Teaching and Learning Goals: Achieving Social Work Core Competencies

The Council on Social Work Education (2015) has identified competencies essential for social work practice. We have placed a matrix on the back cover noting these core competencies as well as a detailed matrix on the book's website that goes into further detail and specifies where these competencies are achieved in the book. While the text touches on every competency, most of the chapters contribute to achieving five competencies in particular:

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior (p. 7). A major focus of this book is the ethical conduct of research. You will learn that the ethical conduct of research is comparable to the ethical issues of practice and the ethical conduct of research is an obligation incorporated into the National Association of Social Workers (2008) *Code of Ethics*. For example, both require informed consent. In addition to a separate chapter on research ethics (Chapter 3), 9 other chapters include content on ethics and every chapter has at least one ethics-related exercise.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice (p. 7). This book addresses diversity and its implications for social work research through substantive sections and examples. You will come to recognize that

there are questions to ask about social diversity in every stage of the research process, from asking a question to reporting and discussing the implications of the research. The book guides you to ask, "Are these findings relevant for the type of clients with whom I work, or are there cultural biases?" Such content is explicitly found in 11 chapters.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice (p. **7**). This book addresses methods that support social workers in assessing mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and to have the data to advance social and economic justice. Concomitantly, students will learn how research can also be used as a mechanism of oppression. You will find many examples that deal with poverty and income inequality and efforts to improve economic well-being.

Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice (p. **8**). This book prepares you to actually evaluate social work practice—your own and that of others. The various examples demonstrate the methods used by social work researchers to discover the efficacy of interventions, to identify needs, and to test the impact of social policies. You will learn principles of evidence-based practice and how research contributes to enhancing practice. With a foundation provided in Chapter 1, nearly every chapter addresses how the particular subject contributes to evidence-based practice.

Competency 9: Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities (p. **9**). This book emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluating interventions through its many examples and offers the knowledge and skills to actually engage in evaluation. To facilitate this competency, there are micro and macro examples. This content is found in every chapter.

A common characteristic of all the competencies is the ability to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional ments. This book provides you with the skills to appraise knowledge, whether it derives from research using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods or from practice wisdom. You will learn to ask many questions before deciding whether conclusions are appropriate to use in their practice settings. These types of questions are found in every chapter.

Organization of the Book

The way the book is organized reflects our belief in making research methods interesting and relevant by connecting research to social work practice, teaching students how to critique research, and providing the knowledge and methods that students can use to evaluate their own practice. An underlying principle reflected throughout the text is that content on ethics, diverse populations, and evidence-based practice should be infused into the various topics; therefore, almost all chapters have specific sections in each of these content areas.

The first three chapters introduce the why and how of research in general. Chapter 1 shows how research has helped us understand homelessness and its consequences. This chapter introduces students to evidence-based practice and the importance of understanding research in our diverse society. Chapter 2 illustrates the basic stages of research including developing a research question, searching and summarizing the literature, and determining a research approach. Chapter 3 provides the foundation for the ethical conduct of research and scientific guidelines for research.

The next three chapters discuss how researchers design their measures, draw their samples, and justify their statements about causal connections. Chapter 4 demonstrates how broad concepts such as substance abuse, depression, and poverty are translated into measures and how such measures are assessed. Chapter 5 reviews principles of sampling and lessons about sampling quality. Chapter 6 examines issues about causality, using a study of the impact of financial training for low-income participants and a study about the relationship of economic status and depression.

Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 present the primary research design strategies: group designs, single-subject designs, surveys, and qualitative methods (including participant observation, intensive interviews, and focus groups). The substantive studies in these chapters show how social work researchers have used these methods to improve our

understanding of the effectiveness of different treatment modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy with different population subgroups, as well as our understanding of social work issues with different age groups, including youth and the elderly. Chapter 11 reviews major analysis techniques that researchers use to identify and understand data collected in qualitative research investigations. Reading Chapters 10 and 11 together will provide a firm foundation for further use of qualitative methods.

The next two chapters demonstrate how these research designs can be extended. Chapter 12 describes two methods that build on the previous chapters: secondary data analysis and mixed methods. Evaluation research is the focus of Chapter 13. We illustrate how these primary methods may be used to learn about the effects of social programs. We emphasize the importance of using a logic model to describe a program and to develop evaluation questions.

Chapter 14 provides a basic grounding in preparing data for analysis and using descriptive statistics. While we introduce inferential statistics, we encourage students to read more about inferential statistics on this book's website, **www.sagepub.com/engelprsw4e**. Finally, we finish with Chapter 15, an overview of the process of and techniques for reporting research results and a summary examination of the development of research proposals.

Distinctive Features of the Fourth Edition

To prepare for this new edition, we have incorporated valuable suggestions from faculty reviewers and students who have used the book. The content and modifications also reflect the first author's experiences when using the book to teach foundation-level social work students. It benefits from the increasing research literature on the effectiveness of social work practice. You will find all of this reflected in innovations in approach, coverage, and organization. These enhancements include:

1. *Increased attention to Secondary Data Analysis.* Secondary data analysis now shares a chapter with mixed methods. The content on secondary data analysis has been greatly expanded with attention to how to access secondary data sources and as well as how to assess the utility of a particular data set. Another new addition to this chapter is a focus on the use of Big Data in research. The ethical issues associated with secondary data analysis and Big Data add additional new content.

2. *Reorganization and expansion of mixed methods in social work research.* Chapter 12 describes the uses of mixed-methods designs with social work examples ranging from practice and policy assessment to measurement validity. The philosophical basis for mixed methods is introduced in Chapter 1 and expanded upon in Chapter 12.

3. *Expansion on the implications for evidence-based practice.* In Chapter 1, we describe the steps associated with the evidence-based practice decision model and the challenges of implementing evidence-based practice at the agency level.

4. *Increased content on qualitative methods and analysis.* We have added a new appendix (C) with questions that should be asked when reading a qualitative research article as well as an example of an analysis (Appendix D). There are new sections on community-based participatory research and qualitative methods, conversation analysis, and ethnomethodology. We have expanded content on topics such as focus groups and how to authenticate results.

5. *Emerging research efforts using the Internet and other electronic media.* We begin by addressing ethical issues and Internet research in Chapter 3. In Chapter 9, we expand material about the use of electronic surveys and discuss the implications of cell-phone usage for survey research. Some researchers are now applying qualitative techniques to the Internet, and so we introduce online interviewing and netnography in Chapter 10.

6. *New learning tools.* We have included a vignette about research reported in the popular press that relates to the discussion in that chapter: *Research in the News.* These examples highlight how research informs media stories, and the two questions will help students think about the methodological issues.

In addition to these enhancements, we continue to update and expand diversity content and add new research-related examples. We also provide new and up-to-date studies of homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, aging and other pressing social issues.

We hope that readers of this text will enjoy learning about research and apply the skills and knowledge taught in a research course to their field of practice. Social workers are in a unique position to discover what interventions work, under what circumstances, and with what populations. In so doing, we benefit our clients and broader society.

Ancillary Materials

To enhance the use of the book, a number of high-quality, useful ancillaries have been prepared:

Student Study Site

Available free on the web at **www.sagepub.com/engelprsw4e** is a collection of high-quality materials designed to help students master the course content and gain greater insight into social work research. The site contains interactive self-quizzes and eFlashcards, a chapter-length review of inferential statistics, articles from social work journals with guiding questions, web exercises from the ends of chapters with additional online resources, and exercises for SPSS.

Instructor Teaching Site

We provide instructors with a variety of useful instructional materials. For each chapter, this includes overviews and lecture outlines, PowerPoint slides, exhibits in reproducible form, student projects, and a complete set of test questions. There are also lists of suggested film and software resources and links to related websites.

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The increasing focus and attention on interdisciplinary research is reflected in this edition of the *Practice of Research in Social Work*. We are part of a support group of researchers, educators, and authors from other disciplines, including Ronet Bachman (University of Delaware), Daniel Chambliss (Hamilton College), Joe Check (University of Massachusetts, Boston), and Paul Nestor (University of Massachusetts, Boston). Together, we have had open and honest discussions about what works and what does not work in teaching students about the research process.

Reviewers for the third edition were Regina T. P. Aguirre (University of Texas, Arlington), Jude Antonyappan (California State University, Sacramento), Judy Berglund (Saginaw Valley State University), Mary Ann Jones (New York University), Junghee Lee (Portland State University), Kirstin Painter (Texas Woman's University), Janice K. Purk (Mansfield University), and Roosevelt Wright (University of Oklahoma).

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