FOURTH EDITION

RESEARCH METHODS

for Social Workers

BONNIE L. YEGIDIS ROBERT W. WEINBACH

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PREFACE

Social work practice is changing in the third millennium. Research, now an integral part of practice, is changing along with it. In this edition of *Research Methods for Social Workers,* we have attempted to retain those features that faculty and students told us they liked. At the same time, we have added material to emphasize the needs of today's students and accountable practitioners.

What Can the Reader Expect to Find?

Like the previous editions, this book is designed for a one-semester or one-quarter course on research methods. It is well suited to either undergraduate or foundation-level graduate social work courses. Its content is consistent with both current Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation standards and curriculum policy guidelines. This book offers a brief conceptual overview of statistical analysis, but encourages its readers to seek a more in-depth coverage of this specialized topic in other texts.

The book is written for both current and future social work practitioners who are likely to be involved in various aspects of research. It prepares the reader to become a critical consumer of research literature, to be able to begin to design and implement research, and to evaluate practice effectiveness either for personal feedback or to improve program effectiveness in a time of increased emphasis on accountability. It presents research as a logical, nonintimidating activity that parallels social work practice in many ways.

Designed to be "reader-friendly," this book contains no unnecessary research terminology or references to obscure, rarely used methods of knowledge building. Students, even those with no prior research background, will find the text interesting and easy to comprehend. It is written in a crisp, straightforward style and refers to contemporary social work practice on virtually every page. Examples are real—the kind of situations that social workers encounter every day.

We are consistently upbeat about research. Our belief that the knowledge, values, and skills of the social worker are much more of an asset than a liability in conducting research permeates the book. We do not believe that research is a "necessary evil" to be grudgingly studied and conducted. It is a logical extension of practice. Thus, the areas that are given a disproportional amount of attention (relative to other texts) reflect this orientation. For example, tasks such as problem formulation, question selection, and use of existing knowledge receive extensive coverage. Are these not also important tasks in good social work practice intervention? Research design—the rich array of alternatives available to get the job of knowledge building accomplished—is discussed in detail.

Changes in the Fourth Edition

This edition is a response to reviewers, other faculty members, and students who took the time to suggest improvements. The reader will notice that there is more infusion of content in three major areas. First, qualitative research methods are discussed, and appropriate examples are offered throughout the book, not just in a single chapter. Similarly, research to evaluate practice, although still the focus of the last two chapters, is discussed alongside research for building our professional knowledge base at many points throughout the text. Third, discussion of ethical issues appears in many other places besides Chapter 2. It receives special emphasis in our discussion of program evaluations and single-system research.

Some of the specific ways in which we believe we have strengthened the book include the following:

- We have included new figures to illustrate the difference between research problems and research questions (Chapter 3) and between broad research questions and focused research questions (Chapter 5).
- We have revised the literature review section (Chapter 4) to reflect changes such as Internet searches and to discuss the different uses of the literature review in qualitative and quantitative studies.
- There is much more discussion of external validity and its relative importance in different research designs (Chapter 6).
- We now offer criteria for evaluating qualitative designs as well as those for evaluating more quantitative ones (Chapter 7).
- We added material on the characteristics of explanatory studies, with special emphasis on the importance of randomly selected case samples and why they sometimes cannot be used (Chapter 9).
- We revised most of the content on program evaluation (Chapter 13) and included new content on use of needs assessments in existing programs and on how qualitative and quantitative methods can be used together to produce more accurate data.
- While still focusing on single-system research as a method for evaluating individual practice effectiveness, we also added content on other ways in

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which practitioners can assess whether their interventions are successful (Chapter 14).

There are again fourteen chapters. The chapters are self-contained, but they are designed to be read and discussed in sequence. Each can serve as a course unit.

Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) places current research within its historical context. It explains what social work research is and how it evolved. The two chapters stress the links between research and practice and how each is guided by similar ethics and values. For example, the issue of voluntary informed consent receives expanded coverage in light of power differentials that often exist between researchers and their research participants.

Part II (Chapters 3 through 5) centers on those "pre–data collection" tasks that generally occur before a research design is selected and implemented. It takes the reader through the process of formulating focused questions and/or hypotheses.

Part III (Chapters 6 through 12) looks at how questions are answered and hypotheses are tested—design implementation issues. Research design is examined from different perspectives. First, design is defined, and general categories of design are described. Then the differences between qualitative (Chapter 7) and quantitative (Chapter 8) research methods are presented and explicated. The components of design (sampling, measurement, use of data-collection instruments) and a chapter on analysis of data and knowledge dissemination conclude Part III.

Part IV examines the methods used for evaluating practice effectiveness. The general knowledge of research methods discussed in earlier chapters is applied to the important task of evaluating social programs and services.

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to a number of colleagues who critiqued the first or second editions of this book and made many valuable suggestions. They are colleagues Gordon Casebolt, Felix Rivera, Murray Newman, Ram Cnann, Miriam Johnson, and James Stafford. Still others, Gail Leedy, Washburn University; Stephen M. Marson, University of North Carolina at Pembroke; and Donald S. Pierson, University of Idaho, carefully read and recommended revisions in the previous (third) edition. Students who used it and faculty who adopted it for classroom use were generous with their comments as well.

Valuable support for our efforts came from Dean Frank Raymond of the University of South Carolina, and the administrators and faculty at the University of Georgia. Judy Fifer and Alyssa Pratt at Allyn and Bacon have patiently guided us through the process of its publication. We are grateful to Tonya Westbrook, a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia, for the careful and thorough preparation of the book's index.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to Barbara Morrison-Rodriguez of the University of South Florida. Because of the time constraints imposed by her present administrative duties, Barbara was unable to contribute to this edition and graciously declined to again be listed as a coauthor. However, her contributions to the third edition were substantive and offered an important perspective on research methods, lacking in earlier editions. Whenever possible we have retained them in their entirety in this book.

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PART I

KNOWLEDGE BUILDING FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

1

HOW DO WE GET OUR KNOWLEDGE?

Social workers, like other professionals, require knowledge in order to make good decisions. They need it both to increase the likelihood that their interventions will be successful, and to determine whether or not they have been successful.

Some of the knowledge that social workers use is acquired through formal education in BSW or MSW programs, or from attending continuing education programs. Or it may come from reading articles in professional journals or textbooks. It may have come from senior-level practitioners who carefully studied a problem that they had observed. Whatever the source of social workers' knowledge, it is likely to have one characteristic in common—it may *not* have been derived from research!

The Council on Social Work Education (the organization responsible for the accreditation of bachelor's and master's programs in social work) recognizes the importance of research content in social work curricula. In its 1992 curriculum policy statements (effective June 1995), it spelled out what social workers need to learn. It mandated that the research curriculum must provide an understanding and appreciation of a scientific, analytic approach to building knowledge for practice and for evaluating service delivery in all areas of practice.[1] The statement goes on to describe the specific content that all professional social workers should receive. This content forms the basis for what we have chosen to include in this book.

Historical Origins of Current Attitudes

Historically, social workers have not always emphasized the importance of research knowledge for decision making as much as have other professionals. In

1979 one writer shared his perceptions of social work practitioners and their relationship with research. Simpson noted that practitioners tend to shun abstract knowledge and to rely instead on (1) humanitarian impulse, (2) occupational folklore, and (3) common sense. He also observed that most of the knowledge that is used for practice decision making is drawn from the work of researchers in other fields. He went on to describe social work literature as permeated with faddism and lacking an empirical base.[2]

Simpson's indictment of social workers is less accurate now than when he wrote it. But the problem—an antiresearch bias among many social work practitioners and students, and even among some professors—does not seem to have totally disappeared. As recently as 1992, two professors conducted a lively debate on the question: Should undergraduate and graduate social work students be taught to conduct empirically based practice?[3] Would we expect to see such a debate in a major professional journal published within other helping professions, such as medicine or psychology? Would the importance of research knowledge and skills even be debatable? Not likely!

Social workers have always recognized the need for knowledge in their decision making. The problem seems to have been the sources that they have been inclined to use. They have tended to seek advice from supervisors and administrators and even their peers when "stuck" with a particularly difficult problem or decision. However, until fairly recently, they have been less likely to use knowledge derived from empirical research in their decision making. Often, they have turned to other sources for help, sources that are likely to contain biases and distortions. Such sources have limited utility and can even be misleading.

Tension between Research and Practice

Over the past few decades, leaders in our profession have expressed concern over practitioners' reluctance to rely on scientific research knowledge for practice decision making. During the late 1970s, both the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) devoted considerable effort and expense to examining the problem of research utilization. They convened groups of leading practitioners and researchers to study it. They tried to determine, for example, why social work practitioners rarely read reports of research or sought knowledge in their professional literature, and why they tended to ignore those research findings that reflected unfavorably on their current practice methods. They concluded that responsibility for the gap between practice and research must be shared by both practitioners and researchers.

Practitioners in the NASW and CSWE meetings described their distrust of researchers and of much of the knowledge that they generated. They viewed researchers, most of whom historically have been academicians, as people who did not really understand the realities of social work practice. Researchers were perceived as more interested in conducting esoteric research to enhance their careers than in producing knowledge that might inform practice. Consequently,

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