



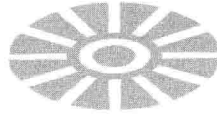
RESEARCH METHODS

FOR SOCIAL WORK

THIRD EDITION

ALLEN RUBIN EARL BABBIE





Research Methods for Social Work

Third Edition

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Dedication

To our children

ANNIE RUBIN

JOSH RUBIN

DAVID RUBIN

AARON BABBIE

ARA VALLASTER



Preface

We have been delighted with the success of the first two editions of this text. In this third edition, we continued to revise the book significantly in an effort to keep up with advances in the field and in response to many excellent suggestions by instructors who provided extremely helpful, thorough, and thoughtful reviews of the previous editions. Our revisions are far too extensive to sum up in a few paragraphs, so we have provided a chapter-by-chapter summary of the major changes that distinguish this edition from the second edition. The most significant changes to this edition are:

- Expanded coverage of content on qualitative inquiry
- New illustrations of how qualitative and quantitative methods can be integrated
- Increased acknowledgment of epistemological approaches other than positivism and post-positivism
- Demonstrations of connections between epistemology and research methods

We believe that one of the most important features of this text has always been its comprehensiveness and depth of coverage, and with each new edition we have sought to strengthen its comprehensiveness. According to most of the feedback we receive, instructors like the depth and comprehensiveness this book provides. Research content can be difficult for students to grasp. We think that their comprehension is aided not by a simplistic approach, but by explaining things in depth and using multiple examples to

illustrate the complex material and its relevance for practice. Moreover, taking this approach enhances the value of the book to students in the long run. Students seem to agree. Rather than reselling the book at the end of the semester, many students choose to keep it for their professional libraries. This text's comprehensive coverage of the range of research methodologies and all phases in the research process—particularly its expanded coverage of qualitative methods, its chapters on data analysis and statistical procedures, and its many illustrations of practice applications (including a new practice-oriented study guide)—also represents our effort to help courses reflect current curriculum policy statements guiding the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER FEATURES OF THE NEW EDITION

Chapter 1: Human Inquiry and Science

This chapter's most significant changes have been epistemological. They include:

- New sections on postmodern and other views of reality and idiographic and nomothetic models of understanding
- Expansion of the overview of quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry, including improved connections to epistemology

The added epistemological material made the chapter quite lengthy, so we moved the section on “The Foundations of Social Science” to Chap-

ter 2, where it seems to fit better. We hope that with these modifications Chapter 1 now sets the stage better for a more balanced approach to quantitative and qualitative methods and for considering the remaining chapters within the context of alternative epistemological paradigms.

Chapter 2: Theory and Research

Major revisions and expansion to achieve a better balance are further reflected in Chapter 2. In this connection, the most significant revision in this chapter is:

- Expanded coverage of paradigms—comparing and contrasting positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism, and the conflict paradigm—and showing the research implications of the alternative paradigms and how each paradigm is reflected in subsequent chapters

In the previous edition, this chapter began with a look at the “traditional” model of science, which some colleagues felt might be misconstrued as implying that a deductive, quantitative approach was always the preferred model. To avoid giving this impression, we now begin the chapter by exploring the role of theory in social work research and practice. We have moved up our discussion of practice models and then discuss paradigms, not in the context of deductive theory construction as in the previous edition, but before we take up inductive and deductive methods. In expanding our coverage of alternative paradigms, we have attempted to alert readers in advance that as they read certain subsequent chapters they may see one approach reflected more than others, but in other chapters, the emphasis may switch. This way, we hope to avoid unintentionally implying that there is only one correct model of inquiry or only one acceptable epistemological approach. Following the expanded section on paradigms is the section moved from Chapter 1 in the previous edition. This section, formerly called “The Foundations of Social Science,” is now called “Theory in Research.” After this comes the ma-

terial on inductive and deductive systems (headed “Two Logical Systems”), which is now introduced in a way that attempts to ensure that readers do not think that one is valued over the other.

Chapter 3: The Ethics and Politics of Social Work Research

Several colleagues made excellent suggestions—which we have implemented—for improving this chapter. One was to move up to the beginning of the chapter the major historical examples that catapulted ethics to the research agenda (that is, the Holocaust and the Tuskegee experiment). Another was to reinstall the section on the Tearoom Trade study. New material was also added on the controversial book *The Bell Curve*, as a recent illustration of political and ideological issues connected to research and race.

Chapter 4: Problem Formulation

The most notable changes in this chapter are:

- Examples of qualitative inquiry infused throughout the chapter
- A box discussing the similarities and differences between quantitative and qualitative research proposals

Other changes to this chapter deal with the at times fuzzy distinction between exploratory and explanatory research purposes, understanding and predicting as research purposes, an elaboration of the advantages and disadvantages of panel studies, and a new box that helps clarify the distinctions between cross-sectional, cohort, trend, and panel studies.

Chapter 5: Conceptualization and Operationalization

Throughout this chapter we have added brief reminders regarding the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research in regard to

conceptualization and operationalization. We also added:

- A section on “A Qualitative Perspective on Operational Definitions”
- A box illustrating the qualitative perspective and its complementarity with a quantitative perspective

We have added this qualitative material without dropping any quantitative material; for example, we have significantly expanded our listing of reference volumes for existing quantitative scales.

Chapter 6: Measurement

Again, we attempted to add a qualitative perspective without sacrificing any of the preexisting quantitative content. This has been achieved through:

- A new section at the end of the chapter examining the role of reliability and validity in qualitative research

Chapter 7: Constructing Measurement Instruments

In the previous edition, Chapter 7 focused exclusively on quantitative instruments, and we alerted students to material in later chapters covering the construction of qualitatively oriented instruments. In this edition, we have added quite a bit of material on constructing qualitative measures, most notably the following:

- Content on qualitative interviewing (moved from Chapter 12), including an illustration of a standardized open-ended interview schedule
- A box comparing quantitative and qualitative approaches to asking people questions.

We’ve also added a little more on culturally sensitive measurement in this chapter (as well as in the previous chapter).

Chapter 8: The Logic of Sampling

Most instructors seem to like this chapter as it is, although some recognize the need to say more about the circumstances under which the reliance on available subjects can be justified and about the implications of using available-subjects sampling in experiments. We have responded to that need in this edition. Other suggestions implemented in this edition include an elaboration of the explanation of Figure 8-6 (on the progression of sampling distributions) and an elaboration of factors influencing sample size (such as the number of variables). In keeping with our effort to add more qualitative/quantitative balance in this edition, we considered adding substantial content on qualitative sampling methods to this chapter. However, in view of the chapter’s existing length and complexity, we opted to expand our coverage of qualitative sampling in Chapters 12 and 13, which focus on qualitative methods and already-covered qualitative sampling.

Chapter 9: Causal Inference and Group Designs

Given its topic, this chapter has been inescapably quantitative in focus and remains that way. The most significant changes to this chapter are:

- New sections on practical pitfalls in implementing group designs in agency settings and mechanisms for avoiding or alleviating those pitfalls, including the use of qualitative methods for that purpose
- A new box on the use of qualitative methods in experimental and quasi-experimental studies

Another new section provides an illustration of a quasi-experiment in social work (in a child welfare agency)—one that illustrates the nonequivalent control group design, a time-series component, and the practical pitfalls mentioned above. Other additions to this chapter include an elaboration in the chapter introduction of a framework

for understanding the functions of these designs, clarification regarding the limited feasibility of blind raters in social work research, and a new section pointing out ways control groups are not denied services.

Chapter 10: Single-Subject Designs

The main change in this chapter is:

- A new section on the use of qualitative methods in single-case evaluation

Chapter 11: Survey Research

The most significant new feature in this chapter is:

- A box illustrating the complementarity of quantitative survey methods and qualitative methods and how combining the two enables us to benefit from the strengths of survey research while offsetting its weaknesses

We have also extended the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of surveys with respect to external validity and sample size and internal validity and the time dimension. In the introduction, we have elaborated the historical context of surveys specifically in social work, giving more attention to the social survey movement and its precursors.

Chapter 12: Qualitative Research Methods

Our effort to achieve a better balance between qualitative and quantitative inquiry in this edition is reflected primarily in the qualitative content infused in chapters that previously were more quantitatively focused. We have also expanded our coverage of qualitative inquiry in this chapter by including the following:

- More content on ethnography
- A new section on relating to subjects
- Identification of additional computer programs for processing qualitative data

- Ways to look for patterns when analyzing qualitative data
- A new section on research ethics in field research
- An indication in the title of each illustration noting the particular qualitative methods emphasized in that illustration
- Three new illustrations, covering such methods as case study interviews, grounded theory, feminist research, and oral life history
- An extensive annotated list of additional readings at the end of the chapter, reflecting the emerging state of literature and interest in qualitative inquiry

Chapter 13: Unobtrusive Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

New material in this chapter includes a new section on conceptualization and the creation of code categories in content analysis, a new section on problems of validity in analyzing existing data, and a new box illustrating the use of existing data to assess the relative degree of suffering in nations around the world.

Chapter 14: Processing Data

We've updated this chapter a bit in regard to time-sharing, microcomputers, and the Internet (which we discuss at length in our new Appendix H). We've also deleted most of our discussion of outdated technology involving punched cards and counter-sorters.

Chapter 15: Interpreting Descriptive Statistics and Tables

Two major changes have been made in this chapter. They are:

- An extended discussion of the elaboration model so as to clarify the concepts of interpretation and suppressor variables

- A new section discussing how qualitative methods can be used to enhance the interpretation of descriptive statistics and how descriptive statistics can be used to enhance the interpretation of qualitative data

Chapters 16 and 17: Inferential Data Analysis

Feedback from colleagues suggested the need to change the sequencing of some of the material in these two chapters. Meta-analysis was moved from Chapter 16 to Chapter 17. Statistical power analysis was moved up to the beginning of Chapter 17. The section on the application of inferential statistics to single-subject designs was moved to a new Appendix I. Reference to a new Appendix J was added to enhance understanding of effect-size values in connection to z scores. Mention of the Bonferroni adjustment has been added regarding running multiple bivariate tests of significance. The most significant revision to these two chapters comes at the end of Chapter 17, where we have added:

- A box illustrating how combining qualitative and quantitative inquiry can help alleviate some problems in inferential data analysis

Chapter 18: Program Evaluation

In this final chapter we have continued to seek a better qualitative/quantitative balance. The most significant changes are:

- A section on process evaluation, including comments on the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in process evaluations
- Acknowledgment of qualitative sampling and qualitative interviewing in needs assessment
- A section on the use of the qualitative method involving focus groups in needs assessment
- A box on combining quantitative and qualitative methods in program evaluation

The other noteworthy revisions to this chapter extend and qualify our discussion of the politics of

program evaluation. So that readers will not get the impression that program evaluation is almost always corrupted by political influences, we have added some comments to help readers develop a savvy, yet not cynical, outlook about the potential for corrupting influences as well as the potential for conducting objective and useful evaluations. A practice example, on an evaluation of a federally funded family preservation program, has been added to further illustrate how external evaluators are not immune to political forces. That example also is used in pointing out that following the steps we've recommended to anticipate and prevent resistance to program evaluation will not guarantee success; things can still go awry.

Appendixes

Four of the appendixes in this edition are new, as follows:

- Appendix G replaces our previous two appendixes on SPSS. In the previous edition we had separate SPSS appendixes for IBM compatible computers and for the Macintosh. The new appendix covers both types of computers. It also covers spreadsheet-style data entry and SPSS for Windows (which were missing in the previous edition).
- Appendix H, "Social Work Research and Cyberspace," shows readers how to use the Information Superhighway for research as well as other purposes.
- Appendix I covers the material applying inferential statistics to single-subject designs, which was moved out of Chapter 17.
- Appendix J displays effect-size values in z -score terms in connection with the proportion under normal curve exceeded by the effect-size value. We hope this display will facilitate understanding of the meaning and utility of effect sizes, since it shows, for any effect-size value, what proportion of control group outcomes are exceeded by the mean experimental group outcome.

We are very excited about this new edition of *Research Methods for Social Work* and think that the extensive amount of material that we have added will meet the needs of instructors and students seeking to keep up with advances in the field, seeking clearer and more thorough explanations of challenging concepts, and—in particular—seeking a better balance between qualitative and quantitative content. We hope you will find this new edition useful. We would like to receive any suggestions you might have for improving this book further. Please write to us in care of Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 511 Forest Lodge Road, Pacific Grove, California 93950, or e-mail us at arubin@mail.utexas.edu.

ANCILLARY PACKAGE

Practice-Oriented Study Guide

Unlike our previous two editions, this edition is accompanied by a *Practice-Oriented Study Guide*, which parallels the organization of the main text but emphasizes its application to practice. It is designed to enhance student comprehension of the text material and to focus on applying that material to problems students are likely to encounter in social work practice. Each chapter of the *Practice-Oriented Study Guide* lists behavioral objectives for applying the chapter content to practice, a chapter summary that focuses on practice applications, multiple-choice review questions generally asked in the context of practice applications (with answers in an appendix accompanied by page references to the relevant text material), exercises involving practice applications that can be done in class (usually in small groups) or as homework, and practice-relevant discussion questions. In addition to enhancing student learning of research content, we hope that this *Study Guide* will significantly enhance the efforts we have made in the main text to foster student understanding of the relevance of research to practice and their consequent enthusiasm for re-

search. We also expect that this *Study Guide* will be helpful to instructors by providing them with practice-relevant exercises that can be done in class or as homework.

Instructor's Manual

As with previous editions, an *Instructor's Manual* mirrors the organization of the main text, offering our suggestions of teaching methods. Each chapter of the *Instructor's Manual* lists an outline of relevant discussion, behavioral objectives, teaching suggestions and resources, and test items. This *Instructor's Manual* is set up to allow instructors the freedom and flexibility needed to teach research methods courses.

The test questions for each chapter include approximately 15 to 20 multiple-choice items, 10 to 12 true-false items, and several essay questions that may be used for exams or to stimulate class discussion. Page references to the text are given for the multiple-choice and true-false questions. Test items are also available on disk in DOS, Macintosh, and Windows formats.

Data Disk

We have sought to provide up-to-date computer—and particularly microcomputer—support for students and instructors. Because there are now many excellent programs for analyzing data, we have provided data to be used with those programs. Specifically, we are providing data from the National Opinion Research Center's *General Social Survey*, offering students a variety of data from 1000 respondents around the country in 1980 and 1990. The disk is available on request to adopters of the text, in Macintosh and both IBM formats (3½" or 5¼" disk).

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suggestions for improving it: Ram A. Cnaan, University of Pennsylvania; Kevin De Weaver, University of Georgia; Joan E. Esser-Stuart, University of Alabama; Trudy Festinger, New York University; Jane Gilgun, University of Minnesota; Jo Knox, University of Texas at Arlington; Lois Millner, Temple University; Trudy Ann Mitchell-Gilkey; Teresa Morris, California State University, San Bernardino; Cathy Pike, University of South Carolina at Columbia; Paul R. Raffoul, University of Houston; Albert R. Roberts, Rutgers University; Sylvia Rodriguez-Andrew, San Jose State University; Phyllis Solomon, University of Pennsylvania; Tony Tripodi, Ohio State University; and Joseph Wronka, Springfield College.

Additional thanks to Jeff Jacques for his assistance in presenting the most recent version of Appendix G and the data disk.

Thanks also go to Lisa Gebo, Social Work Editor at Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, who came up with some great ideas and offered immense support and guidance in helping us complete the rather extensive and challenging improvements for this edition. She deserves a great deal of the credit for what we think is the most valuable new feature of this new edition: its approach to integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. We also appreciate the efforts of her editorial assistant, Terry Thomas, and of Jamie Sue Brooks, senior production editor at Brooks/Cole, who went far beyond routine expectations in providing assistance. Dustine Davidson at The Book Company, our production service, has our thanks for her excellent work and attention to all the details of design and production.

Allen Rubin
Earl Babbie



The Importance of Social Work Research

Most social work students read research methods texts for only one reason—it is required. What’s worse, it is required in a course they never wanted to take in the first place—a research course. Like many other students, you may be wondering why research courses are required for social work students. There is so much to learn about how to help people, and you are probably itching to learn it. Research methodology might be important for academic sociologists and psychologists, but with your still not fully developed skills in the art of helping, you might ask, “Why use up so much of social work education on research methods?”

To many social work students research seems cold, aloof, and mechanistic. These probably are not the types of qualities that attracted you to the social work field. Social work tends to be associated with qualities like warmth, involvement, compassion, humanism, and commitment. There are many social problems for you to tackle out in the real world, and you are probably eager to take action. In fact, your unique background, which perhaps spurred you to become a social worker, may have already led you to identify what particular problem area you are particularly eager or suited to deal with. You want to get on with it, but first you must clear this research hurdle. Welcome to the club!

You might be surprised at the proportion of social work researchers who started out feeling just the way you do. They may have entered the field wanting to become clinical practitioners, administrators, social planners, or community organizers, with no inkling whatsoever that someday they would become researchers. But somewhere along the way they discovered that our field lacks the knowledge base needed to achieve our humanistic

objectives and that without that knowledge base our good intentions are not enough. That is, they realized that we will be more effective practitioners when we learn more about what interventions really help or hinder the attainment of our noble goals. Thus, out of their compassion and commitment to change, they decided to put their efforts where they thought those efforts ultimately would do the most to help the people they cared about—in building our knowledge base.

Social work research and social work researchers are a breed apart from traditional stereotypes of academic research. Their aim is not to produce knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but to provide the practical knowledge that social workers need to solve the problems they confront day in and day out. Ultimately, their aim is to give the field the information it needs to alleviate human suffering and promote social welfare. Thus, social work research seeks to accomplish the same humanistic goals as does social work practice, and like practice, social work research is a compassionate, problem solving, practical endeavor.

At this point you might say, “Okay, that’s nice, but the odds that I am going to do research are still mighty slim.” Very few social workers ever become researchers in the strict sense. But the odds are that during your career you will encounter numerous situations where you will use your research expertise and perhaps wish you had more of it. For example, you may be supervising a clinical program whose continued funding requires that you conduct a scientific evaluation of the effects it is having on clients. You may be a direct service practitioner who wants to use single-subject design methodology to evaluate scientifically your own effectiveness or the effects certain

interventions are having on your clients. You may be a community organizer or planner who, as a guide to resource development, wants to conduct a scientific survey to assess the greatest needs extant in a community. You may be an administrator who, in order to be accountable to the public, must provide scientific documentation of whether your program is delivering the amount and type of service it was intended to deliver.

Chances are, though, that you remain skeptical. After all, this is a research text, and its authors may be expected to exaggerate the value of learning research methods. You might be thinking, "Even if I accept the notion that social work research is valuable, I still believe that the researchers should do their thing, and I'll do mine." But what will you do? The field remains quite uncertain as to what really works in many practice situations.

In 1973, Fischer jolted the social work profession with a review of the experimental research that had been conducted up to that point on the effectiveness of social casework. Only 11 studies met his selection criteria for inclusion in the review, which required that they be conducted in the United States after 1930, include a comparison of social work treatment groups with no-treatment or an alternative treatment group, and involve primarily professional caseworkers as providers of the social work treatment. Of the six studies that compared social work treatment to no-treatment, none found a significant effect for social work treatment. Of the five studies that compared social work treatment to an alternative form of treatment, three found little or no significant differences favoring social work, and two had methodological limitations that rendered their findings inconclusive. Based on this review, Fischer concluded that casework was not effective (Fischer, 1973).

Not surprisingly, many social workers did not like Fischer's conclusion. Some questioned the adequacy of the research methodology of the studies he reviewed. Others criticized the clarity or appropriateness of the interventions evaluated in the

reviewed studies (Blythe and Briar, 1987). One such critic was Wood, who in 1978 published a review of 22 studies that included some of the studies Fischer reviewed as well as some others. (Her selection criteria were somewhat broader than Fischer's.) Yet the studies in Wood's review, too, tended to find that direct social work practice was not effective. Wood attempted to go beyond a general conclusion of ineffectiveness. She did so by postulating what was wrong with those interventions that had negative outcomes and what practice principles could be derived from those with more positive outcomes. But the overall thrust of the findings of the studies reviewed by Wood was much the same as in Fischer's review and provided little basis for optimism about direct practice effectiveness (Wood, 1978).

A more optimistic note was struck by Reid and Hanrahan (1982), who reviewed 22 experimental evaluations of direct practice effectiveness published between 1973 and 1979. All but a few of these more recent studies contained some positive findings about practice effectiveness. More grounds for optimism about the eventual development of effective interventions were provided by one of the authors of this text (Rubin, 1985), who reviewed 12 experiments published between 1978 and 1983. Unlike the earlier reviews, Rubin's review did not require that the evaluated interventions be delivered by social workers, and therefore his findings did not bear upon the debate as to whether direct social work practice had already achieved a sufficient degree of effectiveness. But since all of the studies he reviewed evaluated interventions attempting to achieve objectives that social workers strive to achieve, and since they all were delivered to clientele that concern the social work profession, his findings did bear upon the prospects for social workers ultimately to incorporate effective interventions in their practice. Of the 12 studies he reviewed, six had positive outcomes and sound research methods, three had positive outcomes but some questionable research methods, and three had equivocal outcomes.

Why the big difference between the findings of the newer and older studies (that is, between the older ones reviewed by Fischer and by Wood and the newer ones reviewed by Reid and Hanrahan and by Rubin)? Among the various proposed answers to this question, one is most prevalent. In many of the older studies, the evaluated interventions tended to be unspecific; casework could cover a variety of unexplicated methods. Implicitly some of the studies seemed to assume that the intervention could be defined as whatever a trained social worker does and that therefore when a group of trained social workers intervenes they are delivering the same (or at least a comparable) intervention. In contrast, the newer studies evaluated interventions that were well-explicated and highly specific about the problems they sought to resolve, the goals they sought to accomplish, and the procedures used to achieve those goals (Briar, 1987; Blythe and Briar, 1987).

The reviews just mentioned imply that it is not enough simply to be a trained social worker and therefore assume that whatever you do will be effective. If you approach your practice with that attitude, much of what you do might be ineffective. It makes a great deal of difference which particular interventions and procedures you employ to achieve which particular objectives with which particular types of clientele or problems. Moreover, social work practice consists largely of interventions and procedures that have not yet received adequate testing. Even those that have been evaluated and had positive outcomes may need additional testing before the evidence is sufficient to resolve prevailing doubt as to their effectiveness. Despite the grounds for optimism provided by the recent research reviews about the eventual development of effective forms of direct social work practice, this doubt is not likely to be resolved soon. In the face of this reality, knowledge of research methods becomes practice knowledge, too. For if we cannot say that whatever trained social workers do has demonstrated effectiveness, then learning how to recognize when particular interventions for particular prac-

tice situations have been supported by adequate scientific evidence becomes at least as important a guide to practice as is learning existing general practice methods that, despite being in vogue, may not always be effective.

But, you might ask, why can't we just let the researchers produce the needed studies and then tell the practitioners the results? Then the practitioners would only have to focus on the practice aspects of those interventions that receive adequate scientific support. In an ideal world that might not be a bad idea. But the real world is a lot messier. There is a vast range in the quality of social work research (as well as applied research in allied disciplines relevant to social work) that gets produced and published. Some of it is excellent; some of it probably should never have been accepted for publication. This unevenness has a variety of causes. Attributing it to varying degrees of competence in researchers is only a partial explanation. Many weak studies get produced not because their authors knew no better but because agency constraints would not permit them to conduct a stronger study. For example, later in this book you will learn the value of assigning clients to experimental and control conditions when assessing the effectiveness of interventions. During control conditions the interventions being tested are withheld from clients. Many agencies will not permit the use of control conditions in clinical research. (There are various practical reasons for this constraint—reasons we'll be examining in this text.) Consequently, researchers are faced with a dilemma: Either do the study under conditions of weak scientific rigor or forego doing the study. With no better alternative available, and in the belief that some limited evidence may be better than no evidence, they often will opt to do the study.

This situation means that if social work practitioners are going to be guided by the findings of social work research studies, they need to understand social work research methods well enough to discriminate those studies with adequate scientific methodologies and, therefore,

credible findings, from those whose methodologies are so weak that their findings have little credibility. It also means that the quality of the social work research that gets produced ultimately depends not just on the methodological expertise of the researchers but also on the research knowledge of practitioners and the practice knowledge of researchers. Without a partnership between practice-oriented researchers and methodologically informed practitioners, there is not likely to be a climate of support in agencies for the type of research our field desperately needs—research that is on the one hand responsive to the real needs of agency practitioners and on the other hand done under conditions that permit an adequate level of methodological rigor. Even if you never produce any research, an understanding of research methods will help you critically utilize research produced by others, communicate with researchers to help ensure that their work is responsive to the needs of practice, and ultimately help foster an agency environment conducive to carrying out good and relevant studies.

Earlier we discussed the value of understanding research methods to be able to discriminate which studies are sufficiently credible to guide your practice. Another reason why social workers need to be able to critically evaluate the methodologies of published research is that researchers from outside social work occasionally publish findings that attack the entire social work profession and social welfare enterprise. These authors are not necessarily politically inspired or out to harm the people we care about. They may care about the people we are trying to help just as much as we do and may sincerely believe that social workers and social welfare policies are hurting them. These authors and their research often receive much notoriety in the popular media and are commonly cited by opponents of public welfare spending. A notable example is Charles Murray's book *Losing Ground* (1984), in which Murray compiled masses of data to argue that public social welfare programs developed to help the

poor have actually hurt them more than helped them. Another is Christopher Lasch's work, such as *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), which argued that social workers deliberately usurp parental functions and, in so doing, weaken families and exacerbate various social problems.

If books like these are correct in their logic and conclusions, then we commonly hurt the people we are trying to help and exacerbate the problems we are trying to alleviate. And if their logic or research methodology is faulty and their conclusions therefore erroneous, then it is our responsibility to the people we serve (which includes the public) to have the research expertise that enables us to point this out. Therefore, it is not necessarily out of a concern for professional self-preservation but out of our concern for our clients that we be able to consider arguments and evidence of these critics on equal grounds—not as a profession of anti-scientific practitioners whose disregard for methodological principles forces us to let others decide for us whether our clients would be better off if we all went out of business. Indeed, if we are unable to do so, then we really do not qualify to call ourselves “professionals” in the first place.

Being professional involves a number of things. One is that we strive to make sure that we provide our clients the most effective services available. How do we do that? Do we just ask our supervisors what they think is best? That may be a starting point, but the practitioner who just conforms to ongoing practices without keeping abreast of the latest research in his or her field is not doing all possible to see that his or her clients get the best possible service. Indeed, well-established, traditional social work services have often been found to be ineffective, as indicated in the reviews of practice effectiveness mentioned earlier.

Given the frequency with which social work services have been found to be ineffective and the recent emergence of studies identifying new interventions that appear to be effective, failure to keep abreast of the research in one's field is a serious matter. In the face of the scarcity of findings sup-

porting the efficacy of social work intervention, and in particular the lack of support for the notion that whatever trained social workers do is effective, we cannot justify disregarding the latest research with the rationalization that we are too busy helping people. If our services have not been tested for their effects on clients, the chances are that we are not really helping anyone. If that is the case, then who benefits from our blind faith in conventional, but untested, practice wisdom? Not our clients. Not those who pay for our services. Not society. Do we? In one sense, perhaps. That is, it is less work for us if we just unquestioningly perpetuate ongoing practices. That way we do not make any waves. We do not have to think as much. Not reading research means there is one less task in our daily grind. In the long run, however, practitioners who keep up on the research, and who consequently know they are doing everything possible to make sure they are providing the best possible services to their clients, might experience more job satisfaction and be less vulnerable to burnout.

But the main reason to utilize research is not to meet our own needs to be professional or for job satisfaction. The main reason is compassion for our clients. It is because we care about helping our clients that we seek scientific evidence about the effects of the services we are providing them or of alternative services that might help them more. If the services we provide are not effective, and if others are, then we are harming our clients by perpetuating our current services. That is, we are wasting their time (and perhaps money) allowing their problems to go on without the best possible treatment and, by our inattentiveness to the literature, denying them a service opportunity that has a better chance of helping them.

This point can be illustrated using an example of a highly regarded and often cited piece of social work research in the field of mental health. During the 1970s, Gerard Hogarty (an MSW-level social worker) and his associates conducted a series of field experiments on the effectiveness of drug therapy and psychosocially oriented social

casework in preventing relapse and in enhancing community adjustment in the aftercare of formerly hospitalized patients suffering from schizophrenia (Hogarty, 1979). They found that drug therapy alone was very effective in forestalling relapse, but it had no effect on community adjustment. Social casework by itself had no influence on relapse. The best results on community adjustment were found for those patients who received drug therapy *and* social casework combined. However, the group of patients who received social casework alone, and no drugs, fared worse than the group who received no treatment whatsoever! Hogarty and his associates reasoned that this was due to the tendency of people suffering from schizophrenia to be unable to cope with the increased cognitive stimulation and expectations associated with psychosocial casework. The physiologic effects of drug therapy, among other benefits, improved their ability to handle the stimulation of psychosocial casework and benefit from it. But without the drug therapy, they were better off without the casework!

Now suppose that at the time this research was published you were a practitioner or an administrator in an aftercare program whose caseload consisted primarily of persons with the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Chances are that program may have been traditionally oriented toward emphasizing drug treatment without an intensive casework component like the one Hogarty and his associates evaluated. Perhaps there was no comprehensive social treatment effort, or perhaps there was an untested one that did not resemble the above tested one. If so, then your services may have been making no impact on your clients' levels of community adjustment. Had you utilized the research, you would be in a much better position to realize this and do something to improve it. On the other hand, perhaps the emphasis in your program was on a psychosocial casework approach like the one Hogarty and his colleagues evaluated, but with little or no systematic effort to ensure that patients were taking prescribed psychotropic drugs. In that case, the

preceding findings would have suggested that your program may have been having a harmful effect on some clients, but one which could be turned into a beneficial effect if you had bothered to utilize the research and modified your services in keeping with its findings (that is, by adding a systematic drug therapy component or by monitoring medication compliance more persistently).

The preceding example illustrates rather clearly that understanding research methods, to be able to utilize research discriminatingly, has much to do with basic social work values like caring and compassion. The practitioner who goes through the trouble of understanding and using such research exhibits more concern for the welfare of his or her clients, and ultimately is more helpful to clients, than the one who justifies not taking that trouble on the basis of erroneous stereotypes about research. To better understand this point, sometimes it helps to put yourself in the shoes of the client system. Suppose a beloved member of your immediate family were to develop schizophrenia. Imagine the family trauma and concern that would ensue. Now, suppose that relative were being released to an aftercare program after a period of hospitalization. Imagine the anxiety you and the rest of your family would have about your loved one's prospective plight in the community. Now imagine the outrage you would feel if, after your relative had to be rehospitalized for failing to adjust in the community, you were to learn of Hogarty's research and discover that your relative received only social casework or only drug therapy (but not the two in combination) because the program staff never bothered to utilize the research. How compassionate would those staff members seem to you? Chances are, the adjectives you might use to describe them would sound more like the ones that they might use to describe research (cold, uncaring, aloof, mechanistic, dehumanized, and so on).

But studies on the effects of social work interventions comprise just one prominent example of useful social work research. A long list of other examples of completed research studies could be

cited to convey the value of research to social work and why it is important for students preparing to become social work practitioners to know research methods so they can utilize and contribute to the production of such research. Many of these studies will be cited as illustrations of the methodological concepts addressed throughout this text.

Countless examples also can be cited of additional topics on which you, in your chosen practice role, may someday want to see research findings. Only a few will be cited here, as follows: Why do so many of your agency's clients terminate treatment prematurely? What types of clients do and do not drop out of treatment? What reasons do they give? What services did they receive? How satisfied were they with those services? What proportion of time do practitioners in your agency spend on different practice roles? Do they spend too much time performing functions from which they derive relatively high gratification and too little time on functions that are less attractive but more needed by clients? What characteristics of social service volunteers best predict how long they will continue to volunteer? What can you do to orient them, train them, or reward them that will be the most effective in reducing volunteer turnover? In what part of your target community or region should you locate your outreach efforts? Where are you most likely to engage hard-to-reach individuals such as the homeless or recent immigrants? Why do so many homeless individuals refuse to stay in shelters, sleeping instead on the streets? What are their experiences when they stay in a shelter, and what is staying in a shelter like from their point of view? What proportion of your target population does not understand English? Why are so few ethnic minorities being served by your agency? What does your agency mean to them; what is the agency atmosphere like from their viewpoint? As we have implied, we could go on and on. But you get the idea; the possibilities are endless.

The value to practitioners of learning research methods is not limited to the utilization of research studies. Practitioners will also find value in