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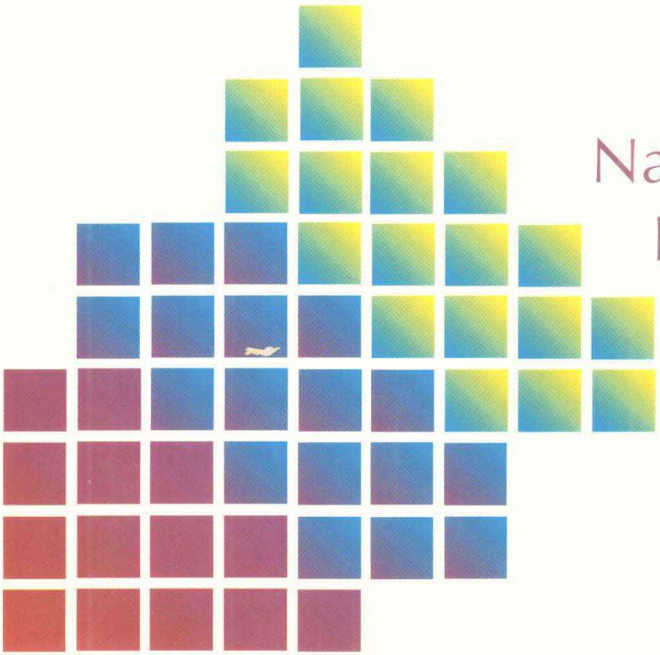
Research Methods in Clinical and Counselling Psychology



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Research Methods in Clinical and Counselling Psychology

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Research Methods in Clinical and Counselling Psychology

THE WILEY SERIES IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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SERIES PREFACE

The Wiley Series in Clinical Psychology brings together books which, between them, represent the central themes in applying psychology to clinical practice. Each book combines theory, research and practical application founded on the best available research evidence. To maintain the impetus of careful observation and research as the corner-stone of clinical practice, we need regularly to re-visit the methods on which our research is based. Only then can our research practice develop and new researchers learn how it is done. This book "tells the story" of research. It takes the reader through the process of research from the first attempt to define what questions to ask, to the final stage of analysis, interpretation and dissemination of results. In addition the authors examine the key philosophical, professional and ethical issues which may arise, and give helpful guidelines in each case. The authors are "methodological pluralists". For example, they show how both quantitative and qualitative methods may be combined so that more valid and reliable results can be achieved. As the delivery of health care becomes more concerned with the need to understand and evaluate its methods, research is becoming a more prominent theme in the training and continued professional development of many health professionals. This book will be a major contribution in this endeavour.

J. Mark G. Williams
Series Editor

PREFACE

This book has grown out of our experience in teaching research methods, advising mental health professionals who were struggling to conduct research, and carrying out research projects ourselves. It aims to help readers become both better consumers and better producers of research in clinical and counselling psychology. We hope that, at a minimum, it will encourage and enable practitioners to read research reports critically and to evaluate a study's strengths and weaknesses. We further hope to inspire at least some of our readers to produce research themselves. In addition to teaching the tools of the trade, we will try to convince readers that doing research can be stimulating, challenging and fun.

The book presents a practical description of the research process, using a chronological framework. It takes readers through the sequence of steps involved in executing a project: groundwork, measurement, design, analysis and interpretation. In addition to these technical aspects of research, the book also addresses some essential background issues, such as the underlying philosophy of the various research methods. We also look at sociopolitical issues, since clinical and counselling research is often conducted in working service settings and it is potentially threatening as well as illuminating. For simplicity, the book has been written from the perspective of producers rather than consumers of research, but we intend it to be of equal use to both audiences.

We have tried to be comprehensive in terms of breadth, but not in terms of depth: there are entire books covering material which we encompass in a chapter. We cover the essential areas and guide the interested reader towards more specialised literature as appropriate. Most of the statistical aspects of research methods are omitted, since this is a separate field in itself. We have aimed

the book at clinical and counselling psychology students and practitioners; others who might find it useful are students and practitioners in health and community psychology, counselling, psychiatry, psychiatric nursing and social work.

The terms therapy, psychotherapy and counselling will mostly be used interchangeably to refer to face-to-face work with clients. Where a broader sense of the psychologist's role is intended, e.g., to encompass prevention or consultation, we will use the terms clinical work or psychological intervention. All three of us have worked in both clinical and counselling settings and we publish in both clinical and counselling journals. We regard the different labels as more indicative of differences in training and professional allegiance than differences in the work done with clients. However, for even-handedness, we tend to use the phrase clinical and counselling psychologists, except where it is too cumbersome, in which case we say clinician, counsellor or therapist alone for convenience. Whatever the language, we always have in mind anyone engaged in clinical, counselling or psychotherapeutic work.

The book addresses those issues faced by clinical and counselling psychologists who do research that are not covered in the more general social and behavioural science research texts. The advantage of having a clinical or counselling psychology training is that you are likely to conduct research with more practical relevance, to ask less superficial questions and to have a strong sense of the complexities of human experience and behaviour. The interviewing skills acquired in clinical and counselling training are also helpful in doing research, but research and therapeutic interviews have crucial differences; therefore researchers may need to unlearn certain interventions used in therapeutic settings. Being trained in clinical or counselling psychology also makes one aware of the tension between the scientific and the therapeutic stance: in the former case looking for generalities, in the latter uniqueness. Throughout the book, we have tried to place research methods in the clinical and counselling context.

Two central assumptions inform our work. The first is methodological pluralism: that different methods are appropriate to different problems and research questions. Until recently, research methods were largely segmented along the lines of academic disciplines. Sociologists and anthropologists tended to use

qualitative methods, such as ethnography or participant observation, whereas psychologists stuck amost exclusively to quantitative methods. Now, however, a significant change is under way, in that psychologists are beginning to regard a variety of research methods, including qualitative ones, as part of their toolkit. For each topic area, such as interviewing or observation, we present the strengths and weaknesses of the various methodological options, quantitative and qualitative. We have tried to be even-handed, to present the arguments and let readers decide for themselves what is best for their particular application. As in our work with clients, we hope to be empowering, to give skills, present options and let our readers make informed choices.

Our second assumption is the importance of the scientist-practitioner model: that clinical and counselling psychologists should be trained to be both competent clinicans and competent researchers (although we hold a broader view of what is scientific than was implicit in the original discussion of the scientist-practitioner model). This model encapsulates the unique contribution psychologists can make to service settings and to the academic development of the field. In practice, many applied psychologists feel that they do not have sufficient research skills, and good intentions to conduct research fail to come to fruition. This book aims to help such practitioners.

The three of us met in the mid-1970s as graduate students on the UCLA clinical psychology PhD program, where we worked together in the Interpersonal Process Research Group. The book bears the hallmark of the excellent eclectic scientist-practitioner training we received at UCLA, but also evidences our struggles against some of the constraints of our professional socialisation. Our own research has continued to be broadly focused on interpersonal processes: such areas as client-therapist interaction, informal helping and couples' communication are what we get excited about. We have inevitably drawn heavily on these areas for our examples, but have tried to make the discussion of general relevance. Our approach to research is strongly influenced by humanistic values: we believe that it is possible to do rigorous psychological research without being reductionist or making a travesty of the phenomenon under study.

We would like to thank the friends and colleagues who helped us by discussing ideas, supplying references and commenting on drafts: John Cape, Lorna Champion, Linda Clare, Neil Devlin, Jerry Goodman (for the slogan "research is fun"), Les Greenberg, Dick Hallam, Maria Koutantji, David Rennie, Laura Rice, Joe Schwartz and Pam Smith. Mark Williams and Connie Hammen provided incisive and helpful reviews of the manuscript. The team at Wiley were consistently supportive: Michael Coombs helped us to get the project off the ground, and Wendy Hudlass, our publishing editor, was a constant source of encouragement and help as the project progressed. Thanks also to our students, who inspired us to develop and clarify our thinking about clinical research and whose encouraging comments on early drafts helped to sustain us. In addition, we are grateful to the research participants with whom we have sought to understand the workings of psychological helping processes. Our interactions with them and the data that they have provided have stimulated and challenged us to broaden our scope as researchers. And finally, many thanks to our children, for constantly reminding us that play is at least as important as work.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction: the research process

> "Where do you come from?" said the Red Queen.
> "And where are you going? Look up, speak nicely,
> and don't twiddle your fingers all the time."
> *Lewis Carroll,* Alice through the Looking Glass, *Chapter 2*

Research tells a story. Ideally, it resembles a detective story, which begins with a mystery and ends with its resolution. Researchers have a problem that they want to investigate; the story will reach its happy ending if they find a solution to that problem.

In practice, however, things are not so simple. (In fact, they are so complicated that we will be reminding you of this again and again throughout the book.) Often a research project doesn't answer the initial question, rather it tells you that you were asking the wrong question in the first place, or that the way that you went about answering it was misconceived. So, next time around, you attempt to answer a better question with a better designed study, and so on. Another way of putting it is that there are stories within stories. Each individual research project tells one story, the series of projects conducted by a researcher or a research team forms a larger story, and the development of the whole research area a yet larger story. And this progression continues up to the level of the history of ideas over the centuries.

How a research area develops over time is illustrated in an article by Hammen (1992), whose title, "Life events and depression: the plot thickens", alludes to the mystery-story aspect of research. The article summarises the author's 20-year-long research programme into depression. She discusses how her original research drew on rather simplistic cognitive models of depression (e.g. that

depression is caused by negative appraisals of events). The findings of early studies led her to modify these models (e.g. to take into account that people's appraisals of events may be negative because the events themselves are negative) and thus to ask more complex questions. Her team is currently working with more sophisticated models, which take into account that people may play a role in causing the life events which occur to them.

Another way in which things are not so simple is that not all scholars agree on what constitutes a legitimate story. The situation in psychology is analogous to developments in literature. On the one hand is the traditional story, rather like a Victorian novel, which has a beginning, a middle and an end, and is expected to provide a more or less faithful reflection of reality. On the other hand, in this modern and post-modern age, we encounter narratives which do not follow an orderly chronological sequence or tie up neatly at the end. Furthermore, they may not claim to represent, or may even reject the idea of, reality. A similar shift has occurred in the visual arts, for example in painting's movement from representational to non-representational art.

These developments in the humanities reflect general intellectual developments over the twentieth century which have ramifications across many branches of European and English-speaking culture, both artistic and scientific. Our own field of interest, clinical and counselling psychology, is currently going through a vigorous debate about the nature of research: i.e. which of these narratives we can call research and which are something else. A number of scholars from various corners of the discipline (e.g. Carlson, 1972; Howard, 1991; Kelly, 1990; Mair, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983; Rogers, 1985; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Sarbin, 1986) have questioned the validity and usefulness of psychology's version of the traditional story, which has been called "received view" or "old paradigm" research: essentially a quantitative, hypothetico-deductive approach, which relies on linear causal models. They call for replacing (or at least supplementing) it with a more qualitative, discovery-oriented, non-linear approach to research.

This debate, as Kimble (1984) points out, is a contemporary manifestation of William James's (1907/1981) distinction between tough-minded and tender-minded ways of thinking, which is itself a translation into psychological terms of the old debate in

philosophy over rationalism versus empiricism. However, it is simplistic to view this distinction as a dichotomy, with researchers being either in one camp or the other. It is better viewed as being composed of several bipolar attitude dimensions, e.g. preferences for qualitative versus quantitative methods, exploratory versus confirmatory research questions, and so on (Kimble, 1984).

One consequence of this lack of consensus about acceptable approaches to research is that people who are doing research for the first time may experience considerable anxiety—rather like the existential anxiety that accompanies a loss of meaning (Yalom, 1980). Undertaking a research project without being clear about which standards are to be used to evaluate it is an unsettling experience. Furthermore, there is a political dimension, since people in powerful positions in the academic world—journal editors, grant reviewers and university teachers—often adhere to the more traditional models.

This anxiety is exacerbated because the rules are not always made explicit, which may make new researchers feel like Alice in Wonderland: as if they are in a strange land with mysterious and arbitrary rules that are continually being changed. Researchers are constantly reminded, in various ways, to behave themselves properly according to these scientific rules: to look up, speak nicely and not to twiddle their fingers all the time. This experience can be understandably off-putting for people trying to enter the research wonderland for the first time.

We will reconsider these issues in Chapters 2 and 4, which address the conceptual underpinnings of research. However, it is worth stating at the outset that our own stance is one of methodological pluralism. We do not think that any single approach to research (or indeed that psychological research itself) has all the answers, and believe that researchers need to have at their disposal a range of methods, appropriate to the problems being investigated. We have considerable sympathy with the critics of the received view, but are not convinced that the consequence of accepting their criticisms is the abandonment of traditional quantitative methods. We believe that it is now becoming possible to articulate a synthesis of the old and new paradigm traditions: that there are fundamental principles common to rigorous research within whatever paradigm. Learning to do psychological research is partly a process of learning disciplined enquiry according to these principles.

At the same time, there are rules of good practice specific to each type of research. We will base our methodological pluralism on a principle of appropriate methodologies (by analogy to the catch-phrase "appropriate technology"). By this, we mean that the methods used should flow out of the research questions asked. Different questions lend themselves to different methods. To resume our literary metaphor, like the different literary genres (romance, science fiction, autobiography, etc.) we can think of different research genres, such as survey research, experimentation and discourse analysis.

We will attempt to clarify these rules and principles, so that you will better appreciate other people's research and, we hope, feel less intimidated about the prospect of conducting your own. Also, the more explicit the rules of research are, the more one is able to challenge them.

Research is demanding: it does require clear and rigorous thought, but it is also fascinating and exciting and, we hope, beneficial to the public that psychologists ultimately profess to serve.

The Research Process

The book is structured around a simple chronological framework, which we call the "research process": that is, the sequence of steps that researchers go through during a project. The steps can be grouped into four major stages. Like all such frameworks, ours is idealised, in that the stages are not always distinct and they may interact with each other. However, we find it a useful way of thinking about how research is conducted, both one's own and other people's.

1. *Groundwork* (Chapter 3). This stage involves both scientific issues—choosing the topic, specifying the conceptual model, reviewing the literature, formulating the research questions—and practical issues—resolving organisational, political, financial or ethical problems. Sometimes researchers give the groundwork short shrift, being anxious to get on with the business of running the project itself. However, we will argue that devoting careful thought at this stage repays itself with interest over the rest of the project.

2. *Measurement* (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Having formulated the study, the next step is to decide how to measure the psychological constructs that are specified in the research questions. We are here using the term measurement in its broadest sense, to encompass qualitative as well as quantitative approaches.

3. *Design* (Chapters 7, 8 and 9). Research design issues concern when and on whom the data will be collected, for example, who will be the participants, will there be an experimental design with a control group, and so on. These issues can usually be considered independently of measurement issues.

The research questions, measurement procedures and design together constitute the research protocol, the blueprint for the study. Having gone through these first three stages, researchers will usually conduct a small pilot study, whose results may cause them to rethink the protocol and possibly to conduct further pilots. Eventually the protocol is finalised; the last stage then consists of implementing it.

4. *Analysis, interpretation and dissemination* (Chapter 11). The data are collected, analysed, interpreted, written up, possibly published and, let us hope, acted upon.

These stages in the research process constitute our framework for the book. However, we will also examine some key philosophical, professional, political and ethical issues that are central to thinking about the whole research enterprise (Chapters 2, 4, 9 and 10). Whilst following these arguments is not necessary for learning purely technical research skills, it is important to understand the wider context in which research is being conducted, as doing so will lead to more focused, coherent and useful research programmes.

The first part of this background material is given in the next chapter, which analyses the meaning of some of the terms we have so far left undefined, such as research itself. We will also discuss why on earth anyone might want to engage in research at all.

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