



Second Edition

RESEARCH METHODS

for

SOCIAL WORKERS

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ROBERT W. WEINBACH

SECOND EDITION



RESEARCH METHODS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Social work research is dynamic. Much has changed about it since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1991. This edition reflects an effort to retain features that faculty and students like. At the same time, it offers a revised content and emphasis that are more consistent with the needs of students and practitioners in the late 1990s.

What Can the Reader Expect to Find?

Like its predecessor, this book is designed for a one-semester or one-quarter course on research methods. It is well suited for either undergraduate or foundation-level graduate social work courses. It addresses both current CSWE accreditation standards and curriculum policy guidelines. Thus, the book meets student needs and requirements in a research methods course. It offers a beginning conceptual understanding of statistical analysis, but leaves a more in-depth coverage of this specialized topic to other texts.

This book was written by two social workers who have worked in social work practice and education for many years. They know what it is like to conduct research, but they also are in touch with the realities of social work practice. One author is female and one is male, which provides an interesting balance of perspectives on research and knowledge-building that is consistent with current thought.

This book is written for future and present social work practitioners who are likely to be involved in research in a variety of ways. It prepares readers to become critical consumers of research literature, to begin to design and implement their own research, and to evaluate their own practice effectiveness. It presents research as a logical, unintimidating activity that parallels social work practice in most respects.

In fact, research is viewed as an integral part of every social work practitioner's activities.

As in the first edition, one of the book's features is that it is "reader friendly." It contains no unnecessary research terminology or references to obscure, rarely seen methods of knowledge-building. Even those students with no prior research background will find it to be easily comprehensible and interesting. It is written in a crisp, straightforward style, and contains references to contemporary social work practice on virtually every page. Examples are real—the kinds of situations that social workers encounter every day.

The second edition is an enhanced, more balanced version of the first edition in that it argues for the need for both traditional deductive methods and newer, more inductive approaches to knowledge-building. New features include a greater emphasis on qualitative research methods and a section on feminist research. There also is more content on social work ethics and on evaluation of practice effectiveness.

Contents and Organization

What features of this book's contents distinguish it from the many other good methods texts that are available? For one thing, we are consistently upbeat about research. We believe that the knowledge, values, and skills of the social worker are much more of an asset than a liability in conducting research. This belief permeates the book. We don't believe that research is a "necessary evil" to be grudgingly studied and conducted. Research is a logical extension of practice. Thus, the areas that are given a disproportionate amount of attention (relative to other texts) reflect our orientation. For example, tasks like problem formulation, question selection, and use of existing knowledge receive pretty 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.

There are thirteen chapters. Each is self-contained, but they are designed to be read and discussed in sequence. Each can serve as a course unit. In Part I, Chapters 1 and 2 place current research within its historical context. They help to explain what social work research is and how it became this way. They stress the similarities between research and practice and how they are guided by similar ethics and values. They explain how each impacts on the other.

Parts II and III contain nine chapters, arranged to reflect a common sequence of activities for conducting research. Part II (Chapters 3 through 5) centers on those "pre-research" tasks that generally occur before a research design is specified or any new data are collected. It takes the reader through the process of formulating focused questions and/or hypotheses, but does not get into how to answer or test them.

Part III (Chapters 6 through 11) looks at how questions are answered and hypotheses tested—design issues. Research design is examined on two levels. First, various design types are described along with how each contributes to knowledge-building. Then the components of design (sampling, measurement, methods of data

collection, instrument construction) are examined and alternatives for each are explored.

Part IV examines the critical activity of evaluating practice effectiveness. It uses the general knowledge of research methods acquired in earlier chapters to discuss ways to learn whether social work programs and services really work.

Acknowledgments

If this book “works” (as we hope it does), there are many who can share in the credit. Colleagues Gordon Casebolt, Felix Rivera, Murray Newman, and Ram Cnann critiqued early versions of the first edition and helped to make it successful. Other colleagues adopted the book as a text and were kind enough to share their suggestions for revisions. Karen Hanson of Allyn and Bacon believed in us and in the book, and offered us the opportunity to make it even better. President Betty Castor of the University of South Florida and Dean Frank B. Raymond III of the University of South Carolina were fully supportive and encouraging of the undertaking. Finally, and probably most important, our students past and present made many valuable comments (some more tactfully than others!) that helped us know what needed to be done if the book were to remain relevant. We greatly appreciate the contributions of all of these individuals.

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P A R T

I

**CONTEXTS AND CONSTRAINTS
THAT INFLUENCE SOCIAL
WORK RESEARCH**

1

KNOWLEDGE, SCIENCE, AND RESEARCH

Social workers, just like other professionals, require knowledge to do their jobs. They seek information to increase the likelihood that their intervention in some problem situation will be successful. Some of this information is acquired through formal education in BSW or MSW programs; some comes from continuing education programs. It also may come from professional journals or textbooks. Or, it may come from senior level practitioners who have carefully studied a problem and what seems to contribute to its alleviation. All these sources of information are likely to have one characteristic in common: They rely on research to a greater or lesser degree.

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 stated 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 tended to regard research as not very important. Over fifteen years ago, 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 fadism and lacking an empirical base.²

Simpson's description may be 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 disappeared. In a 1992 issue of the *Journal of Social Work Education*, 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? Not likely! In the same issue, two other professors further highlighted the problem by expressing their concerns that:

- The teaching of research is flawed at all levels.
- Students in practice methods courses are not required to read published research.
- Institutional supports for research in social work are severely limited.
- Of the research that is published, little is disseminated and applied in practice.⁴

The problem is not a lack of recognition of the need for outside knowledge or reticence to seek it. Social workers always have sought outside help in doing their jobs. We quite willingly seek out supervisors and administrators and even our peers when "stuck" as to how to proceed with a particularly difficult case or decision. However, we have been less likely to seek to incorporate knowledge derived from empirical research into our practice decision making.

Despite the fact that the products of research have great potential to inform the social work practitioner, our profession has tended not to rely on them. We have turned to other sources of information, sources often based upon biases and distortions that both limit their utility and may even mislead us.

Antagonism Between Research and Practice

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 and the National Association of Social Workers 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 seek knowledge in their professional literature, and why they tend to ignore those research findings that reflect 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, they observed, tend to distrust researchers and much of the knowledge that they generate. They tend to view researchers, most of whom are

academicians, as people who do not really understand the realities of social work practice, people more interested in conducting esoteric research to enhance their careers than in producing knowledge that has any real practical value. Practitioners admit to not understanding much about research, but they also accuse researchers of not presenting their findings in a form that can be understood and applied.

It was noted that researchers talk about their frustration with many practitioners' lack of knowledge of or interest in research. They cite a tendency of social workers to reject those research findings that do not agree with what they "know" to be true and to falsely assume that research knowledge is too abstract to be of value to the practitioner.

The problem of research utilization by social workers has continued into the 1990s. But we have both broadened our definition of what utilization entails and reassessed where the responsibility for the problem lies. Over the years, even the professional literature itself has come in for its share of criticism. Writers of letters to the editors of professional journals have regularly complained that articles selected for publication have had little practical value to the practitioner. (Earlier research revealed that a large percentage of the reviewers who help decide whether a paper submitted for publication will be published, themselves have little or no record of research and publication.)⁵

Efforts to Close the Gap

Many years ago, in an effort to resolve some of the antagonism between practice and research and to increase research utilization, Kirk⁶ proposed four objectives for research in social work. They were (underlined below):

- *Research findings should be practice relevant.* Clearly, this still is not always the case.
- *Specific applications to practice should be contained in research reports.* In the past many researchers have neglected this condition, allowing findings to "speak for themselves." But the reality is that research findings may speak less than eloquently, if at all, to social work practitioners if they lack skill in interpreting them.
- *Research findings should be disseminated effectively.* A practitioner cannot use what he or she has never seen or heard. While professional journals continue to be a primary vehicle for knowledge dissemination, they are certainly not the only one. Other ways to share research findings include seminars and workshops, staff newsletters, and audio and video tapes of presentations that might otherwise be inaccessible to practitioners.
- *Practitioners should possess both the skill and the incentive to assess and to change their practice behaviors based upon research knowledge.* In order to achieve this condition, a social worker must possess a knowledge of scientific concepts and procedures that will allow him or her to critically evaluate the research methods and findings of others. This implies a capacity to read between the lines in order to determine whether research findings were obtained using proper methods that give the researcher's conclusions credibility. A social worker should be able to