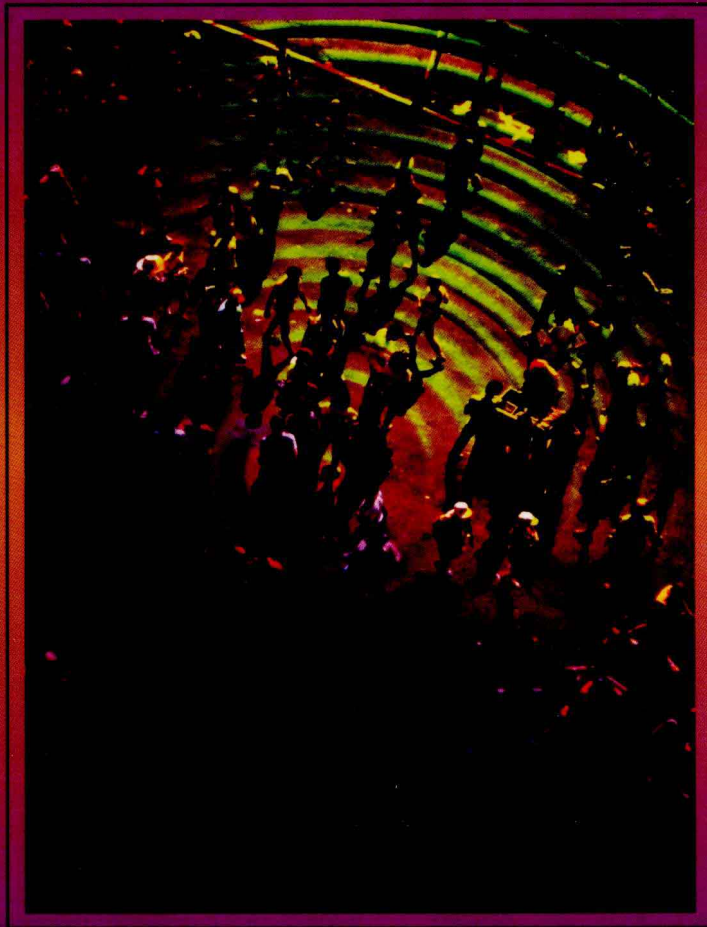


SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH METHODS

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPLICATIONS



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SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH METHODS

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES

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PREFACE

This new book for social work students merges material from the fourth edition of a comprehensive textbook on social science research methods with up-to-date examples of research from the field of social work practice. The book covers basic content on methodology, including the roles of social workers in science and knowledge building, the interplay of social work theory and research, and positivist, interpretive, and critical perspectives. It has an extended discussion of ethics, politics, and the role of Institutional Review Boards, and examples and exercises on social work diversity and empowerment research.

The book compares and contrasts qualitative and quantitative perspectives in chapters on design, measurement, sampling, data collection, and data analysis (including SPSS). It is based on the assumption that students do not learn research and evaluation in a vacuum. Real people engage in social work research, and they do so in clinical, organizational, and community contexts that can affect their clients, interventions, and outcomes. Included are chapters on experimental research methods, field research, nonreactive research and secondary analysis, and social work evaluation. The producers and consumers of social work research need to reflect on how the larger context shapes research activities and how the social work knowledge that is created can, in turn, affect clinical and community practice and larger policy arenas. To this end the authors have developed an extensive chapter on reviewing the literature both online and via traditional sources, writing literature reviews, generating qualitative and quantitative research reports, and writing basic proposals.

Social workers need to be on guard against ethnocentric or narrow locality-specific perspectives that may constrain their own assumptions, values, and beliefs. We believe that new creative ways to do social work research lie in exploring the interplay

between perspectives and research techniques that may apply to only one culture or may be more universal. With greater global communication and contact, social work students should be more sensitive to how and when the activity of social work research crosses borders and informs issues pertaining to empowerment and perhaps to strengthening differing voices. Lastly, we hope to show students not only that both qualitative and quantitative styles of social work research are of value but also that the greatest benefit may well lie in combining them. We believe that maintaining a diversity of perspectives and research techniques will best advance knowledge in the social work practice community.

Larry Kreuger would like to acknowledge the following individuals: Jan Kreuger for her understanding; Charles Cowger, Michael Kelly, and Carol Snively of the School of Social Work at the University of Missouri–Columbia for their encouragement and comments; Howard Karger at the University of Houston for bringing the authors together; Rodney Elliott at Ohio University, Jerome Rosonke at Northern State University, Roy Ruckdeschel and Buford Farris at Saint Louis University, and Roland Meinert of Columbia, Missouri, for their pedagogy; and Carrie Clark, Melissa Kleffner, Lisa Norton, Kathleen Claxton, Dawn Prough, and Jessie Miller for their assistance at various stages.

Larry Neuman extends his appreciation: “Thanks to the many students who have taught me as they learned about research over the past two decades.”

The authors are also grateful to the following reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments: Arlene K. Brown, Florida International University; Jim Hanson, University of Northern Iowa; Steve Kapp, University of Kansas; and Dr. Todd W. Rofuth, Southern Connecticut State University.

CONTENTS

PREFACE xv

PART ONE FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER 1 SCIENCE AND SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH 1

Introduction	1
Alternatives to Social Work Research	2
<i>Authority</i>	3
<i>Tradition</i>	3
<i>Common Sense</i>	3
<i>Media Myths</i>	4
<i>Personal Experience</i>	4
How Science Works	5
<i>Science</i>	5
<i>Pseudoscience</i>	7
<i>The Scientific Community</i>	8
<i>The Norms of the Scientific Community</i>	9
<i>The Scientific Method and Attitude</i>	9
<i>Journal Articles in Science</i>	10
<i>Science as a Transformative Process</i>	11
Steps of the Research Process	11
<i>The Steps</i>	11
<i>Examples</i>	12
Qualitative and Quantitative Social Work Research	16
Why Conduct Social Work Research?	16
Conclusion	18
Key Terms	18
Review Questions	19
Notes	19

CHAPTER 2 DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH 20

Introduction	20
Dimensions of Research	21
<i>The Purpose of a Study</i>	21
<i>The Use of Research</i>	23
Empowerment Research	30
<i>The Time Dimension in Research</i>	31
Data Collection Techniques Used	34
<i>Quantitative Data</i>	34
<i>Qualitative Data</i>	37
<i>The Importance of Diversity and Cultural Awareness in Social Work Research</i>	38

The Role of Technology in Social Work Research	39
Conclusion	41
Key Terms	41
Review Questions	41
Notes	42

CHAPTER 3 THEORY AND RESEARCH 43

Introduction	43
What Is Theory?	44
Theory versus Ideology	44
The Parts of Theory	46
<i>Concepts</i>	46
<i>Relationships</i>	51
<i>Scope</i>	51
Fact versus Theory	52
Theories	53
<i>Direction</i>	53
<i>Level of Theory</i>	53
<i>Formal and Substantive Theories</i>	55
<i>Forms of Explanation</i>	55
<i>Theoretical Frameworks</i>	63
Theory and Research: The Dynamic Duo	64
The Role of Diversity in Social Work Theory	66
<i>Components of Diversity</i>	67
Conclusion	68
Key Terms	68
Review Questions	68
Notes	69

CHAPTER 4 THE MEANINGS OF METHODOLOGY 70

Introduction	70
The Three Approaches	71
Positivist Social Science	72
<i>The Questions</i>	73
<i>Summary</i>	76
Interpretive Social Science	77
<i>The Questions</i>	78
<i>Summary</i>	82
Critical Social Science	82
<i>The Questions</i>	83
<i>Summary</i>	89
Feminist and Postmodern Research	90
Conclusion	92
Key Terms	94
Review Questions	95
Notes	95

CHAPTER 5**THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH 97**

Introduction 97

Ethics and the Researcher 98

The Individual Researcher 98 *Why Be Ethical?* 98 *Power* 99

Ethical Issues Involving Research Subjects 100

Origins of Human Subject Protection 100 *Physical Harm, Psychological Abuse, and Legal Jeopardy* 100 *Deception* 103 *Informed Consent* 104 *Special Populations and New Inequalities* 105 *Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality* 106 *Subject Information as Private Property* 108 *Mandated Protections of Subjects* 109 *Boundaries between Research and Practice* 110

Ethics and the Scientific Community 110

Ethics and the Sponsors of Research 111

Whistle-Blowing 111 *Arriving at Particular Findings* 112 *Limits on How to Conduct Studies* 112 *Suppressing Findings* 113 *Concealing the True Sponsor* 114

The Politics of Research 114

Limits on What Social Work Researchers Study and How They Do Research 115

Direct Limits on Research 115 *Indirect Limits through Control over Research Funding* 118

The Dissemination and Use of Research Findings 122

Models of Relevance 122 *After Findings Are Published* 123 *Findings That Influence Future Behavior* 124 *Academic Freedom* 124

Objectivity and Value Freedom 125

Can Technology Be Used to Preserve Privacy? 127 *How Diversity Informs Ethical Issues* 126

Conclusion 128

Key Terms 128

Review Questions 130

Notes 131

**PART TWO
PLANNING AND PREPARATION****CHAPTER 6****QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS 133**

Introduction 133

Qualitative and Quantitative Orientations toward Social Work Research 134

Reconstructed Logic and Logic in Practice 134 *Technocratic and Transcendent Perspectives* 135 *Linear and Nonlinear Paths* 136 *Triangulation* 137 *Objectivity and Integrity* 138

Quantitative Design Issues	139
<i>The Language of Variables and Hypotheses</i>	139
<i>Causal Relationships and Hypotheses</i>	140
<i>Aspects of Explanation</i>	144
<i>Logical Errors in Causal Explanation</i>	147
Refining Research Topics: Quantitative Social Work Research	152
<i>From a Topic to a Specific Research Question</i>	152
<i>From the Research Question to Hypotheses</i>	155
<i>Where Is the Theory?</i>	157
Qualitative Design Issues	157
<i>The Language of Cases and Contexts</i>	157
<i>Grounded Theory</i>	158
<i>The Context Is Critical</i>	159
<i>Bricolage</i>	159
<i>Focus on the Case and Process</i>	159
<i>Interpretation</i>	160
Refining Research Topics: Qualitative Social Work Research	161
Example Studies: Quantitative Social Work Research	162
<i>Experiment</i>	162
<i>Survey Research</i>	162
<i>Content Analysis</i>	163
Example Studies: Qualitative Social Work Research	163
<i>Field Research</i>	164
<i>Historical–Comparative Study</i>	164
<i>A Look at Elite Studies</i>	164
Conclusion	166
Key Terms	167
Review Questions	167
Notes	168

CHAPTER 7

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE MEASUREMENT 169

Introduction	169
Why Measure?	170
Quantitative and Qualitative Measurement	170
Parts of the Measurement Process	171
<i>Quantitative Conceptualization and Operationalization</i>	174
<i>Qualitative Conceptualization and Operationalization</i>	176
Reliability and Validity	177
<i>Reliability and Validity in Quantitative Social Work Research</i>	177
<i>Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Social Work Research</i>	183
<i>Relationship between Reliability and Validity</i>	184
<i>Other Uses of the Terms Reliable and Valid</i>	185
A Guide to Quantitative Measurement	186
<i>Levels of Measurement</i>	186
<i>Specialized Measures: Scales and Indexes</i>	188
Index Construction	190
<i>The Purpose</i>	190
<i>Weighting</i>	192
<i>Missing Data</i>	192
<i>Rates and Standardization</i>	192
Scales	194
<i>The Purpose</i>	194
<i>Logic of Scaling</i>	195
<i>Commonly Used Scales</i>	195
Conclusion	205

Key Terms	205
Review Questions	206
Notes	206

CHAPTER 8

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE SAMPLING 208

Introduction	208
Nonprobability Sampling	209
<i>Haphazard, Accidental, or Convenience Sampling</i>	209
<i>Purposive or Judgmental Sampling</i>	211
<i>Sampling</i>	213
<i>Sequential Sampling</i>	213
<i>Quota Sampling</i>	210
<i>Snowball Sampling</i>	212
<i>Theoretical Sampling</i>	213
<i>Extreme Case</i>	
Probability Sampling	213
<i>Populations, Elements, and Sampling Frames</i>	213
<i>Why Random?</i>	215
<i>Types of Probability Samples</i>	216
<i>Hidden Populations</i>	227
<i>How Large Should a Sample Be?</i>	229
<i>Drawing Inferences</i>	230
Conclusion	232
Key Terms	232
Review Questions	233
Notes	233

PART THREE

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 9

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH 234

Introduction	234
<i>Research Questions Appropriate for an Experiment</i>	235
<i>A Short History of the Experiment in Social Work Research</i>	236
Random Assignment	237
<i>Why Randomly Assign?</i>	237
<i>How to Randomly Assign</i>	238
<i>Matching versus Random Assignment</i>	239
Experimental Design Logic	239
<i>The Language of Experiments</i>	239
<i>Design Notation</i>	242
<i>Types of Design</i>	243
Internal and External Validity	248
<i>The Logic of Internal Validity</i>	248
<i>Threats to Internal Validity</i>	248
<i>External Validity and Field Experiments</i>	251
Practical Considerations	253
<i>Planning and Pilot Tests</i>	253
<i>Instructions to Subjects</i>	253
<i>Postexperiment Interview</i>	253
Results of Experimental Social Work Research: Making Comparisons	253
A Word on Ethics	255

Conclusion	255
Key Terms	256
Review Questions	257
Notes	257

CHAPTER 10 SURVEY RESEARCH 258

Introduction	258
<i>Research Questions Appropriate for a Survey</i>	259
<i>A History of Survey Research</i>	259
The Logic of Survey Research	262
<i>What Is a Survey?</i>	262
<i>Steps in Conducting a Survey</i>	262
Constructing the Questionnaire	263
<i>Principles of Good Question Writing</i>	263
<i>Aiding Respondent Recall</i>	267
<i>Types of Questions and Response Categories</i>	269
<i>Open versus Closed Questions</i>	272
<i>Wording Issues</i>	276
<i>Questionnaire Design Issues</i>	276
Types of Surveys: Advantages and Disadvantages	283
<i>Mail and Self-Administered Questionnaires</i>	283
<i>Telephone Interviews</i>	284
<i>Face-to-Face Interviews</i>	284
<i>Special Situations</i>	285
<i>Costs</i>	286
Interviewing	286
<i>The Role of the Interviewer</i>	286
<i>Stages of an Interview</i>	289
<i>Training Interviewers</i>	290
<i>Interviewer Bias</i>	291
<i>Cultural Meanings and Survey Interviews</i>	292
<i>Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing</i>	294
The Ethical Survey	295
Conclusion	297
Key Terms	298
Review Questions	298
Notes	298

CHAPTER 11 NONREACTIVE RESEARCH AND SECONDARY ANALYSIS 302

Introduction	302
Nonreactive Measurement	303
<i>The Logic of Nonreactive Research</i>	303
<i>Varieties of Nonreactive or Unobtrusive Observation</i>	304
<i>Recording and Documentation</i>	304
Content Analysis	304
<i>What Is Content Analysis?</i>	304
<i>Topics Appropriate for Content Analysis</i>	305
<i>Measurement and Coding</i>	306
<i>Coding, Validity, and Reliability</i>	307
<i>How to Conduct Content Analysis Research</i>	308
<i>Inferences</i>	310
Existing Statistics/Documents and Secondary Analysis	313
<i>Topics Appropriate for Existing Statistics Research</i>	313

Social Indicators	313
<i>Locating Data</i>	314
<i>Reliability and Validity</i>	317
<i>Example of Existing Statistics/Documents Research</i>	321
Issues of Inference and Theory Testing	322
<i>Inferences from Nonreactive Data</i>	322
<i>Ethical Concerns</i>	322
Conclusion	323
Key Terms	323
Review Questions	323
Notes	324

CHAPTER 12

ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA 325

Introduction	325
Dealing with Data	326
<i>Coding Data</i>	326
<i>Entering Data</i>	326
<i>Cleaning Data</i>	328
Results with One Variable	329
<i>Frequency Distributions</i>	329
<i>Measures of Central Tendency</i>	329
<i>Measures of Variation</i>	331
Results with Two Variables	334
<i>A Bivariate Relationship</i>	334
<i>Seeing the Relationship: The Scattergram</i>	335
<i>Bivariate Tables</i>	337
<i>Measures of Association</i>	342
More than Two Variables	344
<i>Statistical Control</i>	344
<i>The Elaboration Model of Percentaged Tables</i>	345
<i>Multiple Regression Analysis</i>	349
Inferential Statistics	350
<i>The Purpose of Inferential Statistics</i>	350
<i>Statistical Significance</i>	350
<i>Levels of Significance</i>	350
<i>Type I and Type II Errors</i>	351
Conclusion	353
Key Terms	354
Review Questions	355
Notes	355

PART FOUR

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 13

FIELD RESEARCH 356

Introduction	356
<i>Research Questions Appropriate for Field Research</i>	357
<i>A Short History of Field Research</i>	358

The Logic of Field Research	361
<i>What Is Field Research?</i>	361
<i>Steps in a Field Research Project</i>	361
Choosing a Site and Gaining Access	364
<i>Selecting a Site</i>	364
<i>Strategy for Entering</i>	365
<i>Entering the Field</i>	366
<i>Building Rapport</i>	368
Relations in the Field	369
<i>Roles in the Field</i>	369
<i>Learning the Ropes</i>	370
<i>Maintaining Relations</i>	372
Observing and Collecting Data	373
<i>Watching and Listening</i>	373
<i>Taking Notes</i>	375
<i>Data Quality</i>	378
<i>Focusing and Sampling</i>	381
The Field Research Interview	382
<i>The Field Interview</i>	382
<i>Life History</i>	384
<i>Types of Questions in Field</i>	
<i>Interviews</i>	385
<i>Informants</i>	386
<i>Interview Context</i>	387
Leaving the Field	387
Ethical Dilemmas of Field Research	388
<i>Deception</i>	388
<i>Confidentiality</i>	388
<i>Involvement with Illegal Subcultures</i>	388
<i>The Powerful</i>	388
<i>Publishing Field Reports</i>	389
Conclusion	389
Key Terms	389
Review Questions	389
Notes	390

CHAPTER 14 EVALUATION RESEARCH 393

Introduction	393
What Is Evaluation?	395
<i>Why Evaluate an Agency?</i>	395
<i>Why Not Evaluate an Agency?</i>	395
<i>When Is an Agency Ready for Evaluation?</i>	395
<i>Should an Agency Use Internal or External Evaluators?</i>	396
<i>What Should Be the Scope of an Agency Evaluation?</i>	396
<i>Should an Evaluation Look at Existing Information or Start Fresh?</i>	397
<i>Developing a Logic Model</i>	397
Major Types of Evaluation in Social Work	399
<i>Impact/Outcome Evaluation</i>	399
<i>Impact/Outcome Evaluation Designs</i>	400
<i>Monitoring Program Performance</i>	408
<i>Process Evaluations</i>	413
<i>Cost Studies and Productivity</i>	415
<i>Single-Case Designs</i>	416
<i>Empowerment Evaluation</i>	420
Is There a Role for Intuition?	421
<i>What Does an Intuition-Based Social Work Evaluator Do?</i>	424
Studying Your Community: Needs Assessment and Beyond	425
<i>Defining Need</i>	425
<i>Who Should Be Involved?</i>	426
<i>Methods for Assessing Needs</i>	426
The Role of Diversity in Evaluation	429
Conclusion	430

Key Terms	430
Review Questions	430
Notes	431

CHAPTER 15

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA 433

Introduction	433
Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis	434
<i>Similarities</i>	434
<i>Differences</i>	434
<i>Explanations and Qualitative Data</i>	435
Concept Formation	436
<i>Conceptualization in Qualitative Social Work Research</i>	436
<i>Coding Qualitative Data</i>	436
<i>Analytic Memo Writing</i>	440
Methods of Qualitative Data Analysis	442
<i>Successive Approximation</i>	443
<i>The Illustrative Method</i>	443
<i>Analytic Comparison</i>	443
<i>Domain Analysis</i>	445
<i>Ideal Types</i>	447
<i>Event-Structure Analysis</i>	449
<i>Other Techniques</i>	450
What Is Missing, or the Importance of Negative Evidence	452
<i>Negative Evidence</i>	452
<i>Limitation by Omission</i>	453
Other Tools	454
<i>Software for Qualitative Data</i>	454
<i>Diagrams and Qualitative Data</i>	456
<i>Outcroppings</i>	456
Conclusion	458
Key Terms	458
Review Questions	458
Notes	459

PART FIVE

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS

CHAPTER 16

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE AND WRITING A REPORT 460

Introduction: Why Write a Report?	461
The Literature Review	461
Where to Find Social Work Research Literature	463
<i>Scholarly Journals</i>	463
<i>Books</i>	466
<i>Dissertations</i>	467
<i>Government Documents</i>	467
<i>Policy Reports and Presented Papers</i>	467
How to Conduct a Systematic Literature Review	468
<i>Define and Refine a Topic</i>	468
<i>Design a Search</i>	468
<i>Locate Research Reports</i>	468
<i>What to Record</i>	470
<i>Organize Notes</i>	471
<i>Write the Review</i>	471

What Does a Good Review Look Like?	473
Using the Internet for Social Work Research	474
The Writing Process	476
<i>Your Audience</i>	476
<i>Style and Tone</i>	479
<i>Organizing Thoughts</i>	480
<i>Back to the Library</i>	481
<i>The Process</i>	481
<i>Rewriting</i>	483
The Quantitative Research Report	486
<i>Abstract or Executive Summary</i>	486
<i>Presenting the Problem</i>	486
<i>Describing the Methods</i>	486
<i>Results and Tables</i>	486
<i>Discussion</i>	487
<i>Drawing Conclusions</i>	487
The Qualitative Research Report	487
The Research Proposal	489
<i>What Is the Proposal?</i>	489
<i>Proposals to Fund Research</i>	490
Conclusion	491
Key Terms	492
Review Questions	492
Notes	492

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

CODE OF ETHICS OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS 495

Preamble	495
Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics	495
Ethical Principles	497
Ethical Standards	498
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients</i>	498
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues</i>	502
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings</i>	504
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals</i>	506
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession</i>	507
<i>Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society</i>	508

APPENDIX B

TABLE OF RANDOMLY SELECTED FIVE-DIGIT NUMBERS 510

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE OF DATA ARCHIVES AND RESOURCES FOR SECONDARY ANALYSIS 514

APPENDIX D
MEASUREMENT THEORY AND SPECIALIZED TECHNIQUES
FOR INDEX AND SCALE CONSTRUCTION 516

Introduction to Measurement Theory 516

Notes 519

APPENDIX E
SAMPLE IRB PROPOSAL 524

APPENDIX F
STATISTICAL PACKAGE FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES (SPSS) 529

Data Entry Using SPSS 529

Doing Univariate Analysis Using SPSS 536

Doing Bivariate Analysis Using SPSS 543

Sources for More Help Using SPSS 550

Notes 550

GLOSSARY 551

BIBLIOGRAPHY 569

NAME INDEX 600

SUBJECT INDEX 613

CHAPTER 1

SCIENCE AND SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

ALTERNATIVES TO SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Authority

Tradition

Common Sense

Media Myths

Personal Experience

HOW SCIENCE WORKS

Science

Pseudoscience

The Scientific Community

The Norms of the Scientific Community

The Scientific Method and Attitude

Journal Articles in Science

Science as a Transformative Process

STEPS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The Steps

Examples

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

WHY CONDUCT SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

CONCLUSION

“The real problems in social work research methods and evaluation of practice effectiveness are not methodological, they’re not statistical, they’re not ethical. Rather, we need to learn how to succeed in the business of conceptualizing, operationalizing, and measuring success.”

—John J. Stretch, Professor, Saint Louis University, lecture, 1982.

INTRODUCTION

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are surrounded by social work research. Educators, administrators, government officials, business leaders, human service providers, and health care professionals regularly use research findings and principles in their jobs. Social work research can be used to raise children, reduce crime, improve public health, sell products, or just understand one’s life. Reports of research appear on broadcast news programs, in magazines, and in newspapers. Recently, one of the authors read in his daily newspaper about studies showing that an antiviolence course in schools re-

ally works, that the D.A.R.E. antidrug program and “boot camps” for criminal offenders are wholly ineffective, that sobriety checkpoints reduce drunk driving, that 31 percent of gay teens were physically threatened or injured while in school, and that medical doctors admitted through Affirmative Action programs are just as successful as those admitted on test scores and grades alone.

How a study was conducted or data were gathered can generate controversy. In 1998 U.S. news reports were filled with arguments and legal challenges on whether to use sampling methods

developed by social scientists or traditional ways in the year 2000 census. In a popular magazine, we read about advocates and opponents of single-sex schools. Each side offered supporting data, but the author said the issue hinges on the research methodology they used. Another article stated that methods used by the U.S. government to measure unemployment and poverty are flawed, making our understanding of the condition of economy and society highly inaccurate.¹

This book is about social work research. In simple terms research is a way of going about finding answers to questions. Social work research is a type of research conducted by social workers, sociologists, social scientists, and others to seek answers to questions about the social world. You probably already have some notion of what social research entails. First, let us end possible misconceptions. When we ask students what they think research entails, the following answers are usually given:

- Based on facts alone, without theory or judgment
- Read or used only by experts or college professors
- Done only in universities by people with Ph.D. degrees
- Going to the library and finding articles on a topic
- Hanging around some exotic place and observing
- Conducting an experiment in which people are tricked into doing something
- Drawing a sample of people and giving them questionnaires
- Looking up lots of tables from government reports or books
- Using computers, statistics, charts, and graphs

The first three of these answers are wrong, and the others describe only part of what constitutes social work research. It is unwise to confuse any one part with the whole. Just as you would never mistake wearing shoes for being fully dressed, you should not mistake any one of these items for social work research.

Social work research involves many things. It is how a person finds out something new and origi-

nal about the social world. To do this, a researcher needs to think logically, follow rules, and repeat steps over and over. A researcher combines theories or ideas with facts in a systematic way and uses his or her imagination and creativity. He or she quickly learns to organize and plan carefully and to select the appropriate technique to address a question. A researcher also must be sensitive to treating the people who are being studied in ethical and moral ways. In addition, a researcher must communicate to others clearly.

Social work research is a collection of methods people use systematically to produce knowledge. It is an exciting process of discovery, but it requires persistence, personal integrity, tolerance for ambiguity, interaction with others, and pride in doing quality work. You will learn more about the diversity of social research in Chapter 2.

Do not expect this book to transform you into an expert social work researcher. It can teach you to be a better consumer of research results, give you an understanding of how the research enterprise works, and prepare you to conduct small research projects yourself. After reading this textbook, you will understand research, its meaning, what it can and cannot do, and its role in the larger society.

ALTERNATIVES TO SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

You learned most of what you know about the social world by an alternative to social work research. A great deal of what you know about the social world is based on what your parents and others have told you. You also have knowledge that you have learned from personal experience and practice. The books and magazines you have read and the movies and television you have watched also have given you information. You may also use common sense to learn about the social world.

In addition to being a collection of methods, social research is a process for producing knowledge about the social world. It is a more structured, organized, and systematic process than the alternatives.² Knowledge from the alternatives is often correct, but knowledge based on research is more likely to be true and has fewer potential errors. It is

important to recognize that research does not always produce perfect knowledge. Nonetheless, compared to the alternatives, it is less likely to be flawed. Let us review the alternatives before examining social work research.

Authority

You gain knowledge from parents, teachers, and experts as well as from books and television and other media. When you accept something as being true just because someone in a position of authority says it is true or because it is in an authoritative publication, you are using authority as a basis of knowledge. Relying on the wisdom of authorities has advantages—it is a quick, simple, and inexpensive way to learn something. Authorities often spend time and effort to learn something, and you can benefit from their experience and work.

Relying on authorities also has limitations. It is easy to overestimate the expertise of other people. You may assume that they are right when they are not. Authorities may speak on fields they know little about; they can be plain wrong. An expert in one area may try to use his or her authority in an unrelated area. Have you ever seen television commercials wherein an expert in football uses that expertise to try to convince you to buy a car? In addition, there are these questions: Who is or is not an authority? Whom do you believe when different authorities disagree? For example, there was a time when we saw a high school teacher as being an authority on physics. Now we know that such authority does not stand up to that of a Nobel Prize winner in physics.

History is full of past experts whom we now see as being misinformed. For example, some “experts” of the past measured intelligence by counting bumps on the skull; other “experts” used bloodletting to try to cure diseases. Their errors seem obvious now, but can you be certain that today’s experts will not become tomorrow’s fools? Also, too much reliance on authorities can be dangerous to a democratic society. An overdependence on experts lets them keep others in the dark, and they may promote ideas that strengthen their power and position. When we have no idea of how the experts arrived at

their knowledge, we lose some of our ability to make judgments for ourselves.

Tradition

People sometimes rely on tradition for knowledge. Tradition is a special case of authority—the authority of the past. Tradition means you accept something as being true because “it’s the way things have always been.” For example, a father-in-law said that “drinking a shot of whiskey cures a cold.” When asked about his statement, he said that he had learned it from his father when he was a child, and it had come down from past generations. Tradition was the basis of the knowledge for the cure.

Here is an example more from the social world. Many people believe that children who are raised at home by their mothers grow up to be better adjusted and have fewer personal problems than those raised in other settings. People “know” this, but how did they learn it? Most accept it because they believe (rightly or wrongly) that it was true in the past or is the way things have always been done.

Some traditional social knowledge begins as simple prejudice. A belief such as “people from that side of the tracks will never amount to anything” or “you never can trust anyone of that race” comes down from the past. Even if traditional knowledge was once true, it can become distorted as it is passed on, and soon it is no longer true. People may cling to traditional knowledge without real understanding; they assume that because something may have worked or been true in the past, it must always be true.

Common Sense

You know a lot about the social world from your ordinary reasoning or common sense. You rely on what everyone knows and what “just makes sense.” For example, it “just makes sense” that murder rates are higher in nations that do not have a death penalty, because people are less likely to kill if they face execution for doing so. This and other widely held commonsense beliefs, such as that poor youth are more likely to commit deviant acts than those from the middle class, or that most Catholics do not use birth control, are false.