

Research for social workers: An introduction to methods (4th ed.)

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Social workers must understand their responsibility for research and publications (ANZASW, 2013; SWRB 2016), develop “research-mindedness” (Flynn & McDermott, 2016), including being ongoing critical consumers of research evidence that can be incorporated into everyday practice (Gray, Plath, & Webb, 2009), and increasingly, become social work research practitioners (Beddoe, Yates, Fouche, & Harington, 2010). As a social work educator who works alongside students to understand the value of research evidence in decision-making, I found this text helpful and highly recommend it as a resource for students and graduates. This fourth edition provides an accessible guide for beginning researchers to some key research philosophies, perspectives, strategies, designs and methods. Choosing a research topic, developing answerable questions, selecting appropriate methodology and methods, analysing findings, documenting and disseminating the research are all discussed with embedded social work research examples. Chapters conclude with further reading lists, discussion questions and exercises to aid understanding. The well-referenced text is divided into five parts (beginning social work research; research methods for social work; evaluation; statistical analysis; bringing it all together) with a number of chapters within each part. Chapters can be utilised as stand-alone or together as a congruent whole consideration of research for social workers. The text sits alongside many familiar social science research methodology texts and provides excellent connections for the reader to the field of social work research.

Part one introduces social work research. In chapter one the priorities in the research process of social work values, human rights and social justice within political, social, and economic contexts, with a focus on action and change are all identified. While the cultural context of research is briefly explored later in the chapter, greater prominence for the place of indigenous research could be made. The chapter explores quantitative and qualitative methodological strategies as well as emancipatory, feminist and postmodern influences on research methods. While outlining different forms of research and the power of underlying beliefs separately for clarity, the explanation of how mixed methods, combining aspects of these strategies and methodologies, can enhance the validity of the research findings is useful. The authors argue that inductive and deductive thinking can be seen as different phases of a cyclical process of developing knowledge, theory building and theory testing. A discussion around the politics and ethics of research concludes this chapter. The questions and exercises provide a useful guide for the critical analysis of research publications as well as consideration of the many dimensions of developing a research project.

Chapter two explores choosing a research topic and the importance of identifying the underlying conceptual framework in defining the criteria and purpose of the research. The value of an advisory group made up of the project’s key players is also outlined. Chapter three focuses on developing the research questions utilising either a quantitative or qualitative

methodological strategy. A useful case example demonstrating quantitative research is utilised to demonstrate how the questions influence the research design and the potential data analysis that might result. This example introduces, explains, and demystifies language utilised in quantitative research. Quantitative research questions are then compared to the bottom-up deductive approach for developing qualitative research questions that maintain credibility, trustworthiness and rigour. An excellent discussion on how epistemological markers (paradigm, theory, power, reflexivity), along with other factors including triangulation of evidence, persistent observation or prolonged engagement, and member checking can demonstrate trustworthiness and rigour is provided.

Chapter four summarises seven stages in the research process. Quantitative and qualitative research examples are given. As background to these steps, the factors that influence the nature and success of the research including the agency context, theoretical and socio political context, professional and personal contexts and practical issues to ensure manageable, clear research projects are identified. It may have been useful to link the student academic setting into this discussion, given the text's target audience includes students.

Parts two and three provide an overview of different research methods and processes of analysis. Specific sections may be focussed upon by readers that best applies to the research they are considering. Individual chapters describe methods often useful for social work research including sampling, systematic reviews or secondary data analysis, surveys and interviews, and assessing community needs and strengths, evaluation including programme evaluation,

action research, evidence-based practice and best practice evaluation, community-based rapid appraisals (post-disaster recovery and other crisis situations research), and other methods.

Part four is titled statistical analysis, and concentrates on analysis for both qualitative research and statistical analysis for quantitative research. Different ways of analysing data are presented with reference made to software packages. Part five brings the content of the text together by considering two critical phases in the research process: having an impact on policy and practice, and writing up the research to ensure maximum impact and leading to action. The final chapter of the text provides a guide to developing a research proposal and, although this stage in the research process happens much earlier, without an understanding of, and decisions made around, the full research process, the research proposal could not be completed, hence the logic behind the placement of this chapter.

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