THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

Rafael J. Engel
Russell K. Schutt

4e

THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

SAGE was founded in 1965 by Sara Miller McCune to support the dissemination of usable knowledge by publishing innovative and high-quality research and teaching content. Today, we publish over 900 journals, including those of more than 400 learned societies, more than 800 new books per year, and a growing range of library products including archives, data, case studies, reports, and video. SAGE remains majority-owned by our founder, and after Sara's lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures our continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC

THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

Rafael J. Engel
University of Pittsburgh

Russell K. Schutt
University of Massachusetts Boston

4e

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Engel, Rafael J., author. | Schutt, Russell K., author.

Title: The practice of research in social work / Rafael J. Engel, Russell K. Schutt.

Description: Fourth edition. | Thousand Oaks, California : SAGE, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015038935 | ISBN 978-1-5063-0426-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Social service—Research.

Classification: LCC HV11 .E57 2017 | DDC 361.3072—dc23 LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015038935

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Acquisitions Editor: Jerry Westby
eLearning Editor: Gabrielle Piccininni
Editorial Assistant: Laura Kirkhuff
Production Editor: Libby Larson
Copy Editor: Kristin Bergstad
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Wendy Jo Dymond
Indexer: Joan Shapiro
Cover Designer: Anupama Krishnan
Marketing Manager: Shari Countryman

16 17 18 19 20 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Brief Contents

On the Study Site

Detailed Contents

On the Study Site

Preface

There has been tremendous progress by social work professionals and educators in building the profession's research infrastructure. There are now national research centers, federal and foundation research initiatives, institutional support, and dissemination efforts by organizations such as the Council on Social Work Education and the Society for Social Work Research. These accomplishments provide new opportunities for social work graduates and make your research training even more critical.

Whether you are eager to take an introductory course in social work research or you are wondering why you have to take this class as all you want to do is work with people, we hope that by the end of the course, you will understand how important research is—how it can contribute to your understanding of social problems, the human condition, and to micro and macro practice. We use different examples such as domestic violence, homelessness, poverty, child welfare, and aging that cut across the domains of social work practice.

By the end of this book, you should have the skills necessary to critically evaluate the research articles that you read across all your social work courses. You should not just accept findings because they appear in print; rather, you will learn to ask many questions before concluding that research-based conclusions are appropriate. What did the researchers set out to investigate? How were people selected for study? What information was collected, and how was it analyzed? Can the findings be applied to populations not part of the study? To different settings? Communities?

Another goal of this book is to prepare you to actually evaluate social work practice. The various examples demonstrate the methods used by social work researchers to discover the efficacy of interventions, to identify needs, and to test the impact of social policies. Evaluation is a key component of social work practice; it is through evaluation that we determine the efficacy of work with individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Achieving these goals will provide a foundation for evidence-based practice. As part of evidence-based practice it is imperative that you are able to locate research, understand research findings, and critique the quality of the research. You will also need to assess the applicability of the findings for diverse people.

Teaching and Learning Goals: Achieving Social Work Core Competencies

The Council on Social Work Education (2015) has identified competencies essential for social work practice. We have placed a matrix on the back cover noting these core competencies as well as a detailed matrix on the book's website that goes into further detail and specifies where these competencies are achieved in the book. While the text touches on every competency, most of the chapters contribute to achieving five competencies in particular:

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior (p. **7**). A major focus of this book is the ethical conduct of research. You will learn that the ethical conduct of research is comparable to the ethical issues of practice and the ethical conduct of research is an obligation incorporated into the National Association of Social Workers (2008) *Code of Ethics*. For example, both require informed consent. In addition to a separate chapter on research ethics (Chapter 3), 9 other chapters include content on ethics and every chapter has at least one ethics-related exercise.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice (p. **7**). This book addresses diversity and its implications for social work research through substantive sections and examples. You will come to recognize that

there are questions to ask about social diversity in every stage of the research process, from asking a question to reporting and discussing the implications of the research. The book guides you to ask, "Are these findings relevant for the type of clients with whom I work, or are there cultural biases?" Such content is explicitly found in 11 chapters.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice (p. **7**). This book addresses methods that support social workers in assessing mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and to have the data to advance social and economic justice. Concomitantly, students will learn how research can also be used as a mechanism of oppression. You will find many examples that deal with poverty and income inequality and efforts to improve economic well-being.

Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice (p. **8**). This book prepares you to actually evaluate social work practice—your own and that of others. The various examples demonstrate the methods used by social work researchers to discover the efficacy of interventions, to identify needs, and to test the impact of social policies. You will learn principles of evidence-based practice and how research contributes to enhancing practice. With a foundation provided in Chapter 1, nearly every chapter addresses how the particular subject contributes to evidence-based practice.

Competency 9: Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities (p. **9**). This book emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluating interventions through its many examples and offers the knowledge and skills to actually engage in evaluation. To facilitate this competency, there are micro and macro examples. This content is found in every chapter.

A common characteristic of all the competencies is the ability to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional ments. This book provides you with the skills to appraise knowledge, whether it derives from research using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods or from practice wisdom. You will learn to ask many questions before deciding whether conclusions are appropriate to use in their practice settings. These types of questions are found in every chapter.

Organization of the Book

The way the book is organized reflects our belief in making research methods interesting and relevant by connecting research to social work practice, teaching students how to critique research, and providing the knowledge and methods that students can use to evaluate their own practice. An underlying principle reflected throughout the text is that content on ethics, diverse populations, and evidence-based practice should be infused into the various topics; therefore, almost all chapters have specific sections in each of these content areas.

The first three chapters introduce the why and how of research in general. Chapter 1 shows how research has helped us understand homelessness and its consequences. This chapter introduces students to evidence-based practice and the importance of understanding research in our diverse society. Chapter 2 illustrates the basic stages of research including developing a research question, searching and summarizing the literature, and determining a research approach. Chapter 3 provides the foundation for the ethical conduct of research and scientific guidelines for research.

The next three chapters discuss how researchers design their measures, draw their samples, and justify their statements about causal connections. Chapter 4 demonstrates how broad concepts such as substance abuse, depression, and poverty are translated into measures and how such measures are assessed. Chapter 5 reviews principles of sampling and lessons about sampling quality. Chapter 6 examines issues about causality, using a study of the impact of financial training for low-income participants and a study about the relationship of economic status and depression.

Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 present the primary research design strategies: group designs, single-subject designs, surveys, and qualitative methods (including participant observation, intensive interviews, and focus groups). The substantive studies in these chapters show how social work researchers have used these methods to improve our

understanding of the effectiveness of different treatment modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy with different population subgroups, as well as our understanding of social work issues with different age groups, including youth and the elderly. Chapter 11 reviews major analysis techniques that researchers use to identify and understand data collected in qualitative research investigations. Reading Chapters 10 and 11 together will provide a firm foundation for further use of qualitative methods.

The next two chapters demonstrate how these research designs can be extended. Chapter 12 describes two methods that build on the previous chapters: secondary data analysis and mixed methods. Evaluation research is the focus of Chapter 13. We illustrate how these primary methods may be used to learn about the effects of social programs. We emphasize the importance of using a logic model to describe a program and to develop evaluation questions.

Chapter 14 provides a basic grounding in preparing data for analysis and using descriptive statistics. While we introduce inferential statistics, we encourage students to read more about inferential statistics on this book's website, **www.sagepub.com/engelprsw4e**. Finally, we finish with Chapter 15, an overview of the process of and techniques for reporting research results and a summary examination of the development of research proposals.

Distinctive Features of the Fourth Edition

To prepare for this new edition, we have incorporated valuable suggestions from faculty reviewers and students who have used the book. The content and modifications also reflect the first author's experiences when using the book to teach foundation-level social work students. It benefits from the increasing research literature on the effectiveness of social work practice. You will find all of this reflected in innovations in approach, coverage, and organization. These enhancements include:

1. *Increased attention to Secondary Data Analysis.* Secondary data analysis now shares a chapter with mixed methods. The content on secondary data analysis has been greatly expanded with attention to how to access secondary data sources and as well as how to assess the utility of a particular data set. Another new addition to this chapter is a focus on the use of Big Data in research. The ethical issues associated with secondary data analysis and Big Data add additional new content.
2. *Reorganization and expansion of mixed methods in social work research.* Chapter 12 describes the uses of mixed-methods designs with social work examples ranging from practice and policy assessment to measurement validity. The philosophical basis for mixed methods is introduced in Chapter 1 and expanded upon in Chapter 12.
3. *Expansion on the implications for evidence-based practice.* In Chapter 1, we describe the steps associated with the evidence-based practice decision model and the challenges of implementing evidence-based practice at the agency level.
4. *Increased content on qualitative methods and analysis.* We have added a new appendix (C) with questions that should be asked when reading a qualitative research article as well as an example of an analysis (Appendix D). There are new sections on community-based participatory research and qualitative methods, conversation analysis, and ethnomethodology. We have expanded content on topics such as focus groups and how to authenticate results.
5. *Emerging research efforts using the Internet and other electronic media.* We begin by addressing ethical issues and Internet research in Chapter 3. In Chapter 9, we expand material about the use of electronic surveys and discuss the implications of cell-phone usage for survey research. Some researchers are now applying qualitative techniques to the Internet, and so we introduce online interviewing and netnography in Chapter 10.

6. *New learning tools*. We have included a vignette about research reported in the popular press that relates to the discussion in that chapter: *Research in the News*. These examples highlight how research informs media stories, and the two questions will help students think about the methodological issues.

In addition to these enhancements, we continue to update and expand diversity content and add new research-related examples. We also provide new and up-to-date studies of homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, aging and other pressing social issues.

We hope that readers of this text will enjoy learning about research and apply the skills and knowledge taught in a research course to their field of practice. Social workers are in a unique position to discover what interventions work, under what circumstances, and with what populations. In so doing, we benefit our clients and broader society.

Ancillary Materials

To enhance the use of the book, a number of high-quality, useful ancillaries have been prepared:

Student Study Site

Available free on the web at **www.sagepub.com/engelprsw4e** is a collection of high-quality materials designed to help students master the course content and gain greater insight into social work research. The site contains interactive self-quizzes and eFlashcards, a chapter-length review of inferential statistics, articles from social work journals with guiding questions, web exercises from the ends of chapters with additional online resources, and exercises for SPSS.

Instructor Teaching Site

We provide instructors with a variety of useful instructional materials. For each chapter, this includes overviews and lecture outlines, PowerPoint slides, exhibits in reproducible form, student projects, and a complete set of test questions. There are also lists of suggested film and software resources and links to related websites.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks to Jerry Westby, publisher, SAGE Publications. Jerry's enthusiasm and support for this project has been crucial, and his patience extraordinary. He is an exceptionally talented publisher and book developer with a clear vision about how best to serve students and enhance their learning. We are also deeply indebted to Laura Kirkhuff, Libby Larson, and Kristin Bergstad, who made this text into something more than just words in a word-processed file. Special thanks are also due to Samantha Levinson (Carnegie Mellon University) for updating the ancillary materials on the instructor teaching site and student study site.

We are indebted to the talented group of social work professors whose suggestions and insights have helped improve every chapter. They are

Kathleen A. Bolland, University of Alabama

April Murphy, Western Kentucky University

Catherine M. L. Pearl, University of Calgary

Mary I. Armstrong, University of South Florida

Elizabeth K. Anthony, Arizona State University

Michel Coconis, University of Toledo

Ericka Kimball, Portland State University

Faith Pratt Hopp, Wayne State University

The increasing focus and attention on interdisciplinary research is reflected in this edition of the *Practice of Research in Social Work*. We are part of a support group of researchers, educators, and authors from other disciplines, including Ronet Bachman (University of Delaware), Daniel Chambliss (Hamilton College), Joe Check (University of Massachusetts, Boston), and Paul Nestor (University of Massachusetts, Boston). Together, we have had open and honest discussions about what works and what does not work in teaching students about the research process.

Reviewers for the third edition were Regina T. P. Aguirre (University of Texas, Arlington), Jude Antonyappan (California State University, Sacramento), Judy Berglund (Saginaw Valley State University), Mary Ann Jones (New York University), Junghee Lee (Portland State University), Kirstin Painter (Texas Woman's University), Janice K. Purk (Mansfield University), and Roosevelt Wright (University of Oklahoma).

Second edition reviewers included Catherine Baratta (Central Connecticut State University), Judy Berglund (Saginaw Valley State University), Michael Fendrich (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee), Judith G. Gonyea (Boston University), Lisa Hines (San Francisco State University), Michael Kane (Florida Atlantic University), John L. Murphy (University of the District of Columbia), Bassima Schbley (Washburn University), Cathryne L. Schmitz (University of North Carolina at Greensboro), Audrey Shillington (San Diego State University), Abigail Tilton (Texas Woman's University), Carol Williams (Kean University), and Mike Wolf-Branigin (George Mason University).

First edition reviewers included Leslie B. Alexander (Bryn Mawr College), Julie Cooper Altman (Adelphi University), Patrick S. Bordnick (University of Georgia), Fred Brooks (Georgia State University), Jong Choi (California State Bakersfield), Adele Crudden (Mississippi State University), Tim Dyeson (Louisiana State University), Mark Ezell (University of Kansas), James Hanson (University of Northern Iowa), Sanford Schram (Bryn Mawr College), Emily Spence-Diehl (University of Texas at Arlington), Jim Stafford (University of Mississippi), and Gary Widrick (University of Vermont).

We both thank our spouses, Sandy Budd and Elizabeth Schneider, for their love and support (and patience!), and our children, Yael, Meir, and Julia, for the inspiration they provide and the joy they bring to our lives.

CHAPTER 1

Science, Society, and Social Work Research

Burt had worked as a welder when he was younger, but alcoholism and related physical and mental health problems interfered with his career plans. By the time he was 60, Burt had spent many years on the streets. Fortunately, he obtained an apartment in 2008 through a housing program for homeless persons. Although the *Boston Globe* reporter who interviewed him reported that "the lure of booze and friends from the street was [still] strong," Burt had finally made the transition back to a more settled life (Abel, 2008, p. A14).

It is a sad story with an all-too-uncommon happy—although uncertain—ending. Together with one other such story and comments by several service staff, the newspaper article provides a persuasive rationale for the new housing program. Does Burt's story sound familiar? Such newspaper stories proliferate when the holiday season approaches, but what do they really tell us about homelessness? How typical is Burt's story? Why do people live on the streets? What helps them to regain housing?

In the rest of this chapter, you will learn how the methods of social science research go beyond stories in the popular media to help us answer questions like these. By the chapter's end, you should know what is "scientific" in social science and appreciate how the methods of science can help us understand the problems of society.

Reasoning About the Social World

The story of just one homeless person raises many questions. Take a few minutes to read each of the following questions and jot down your answers. Do not ruminate about the questions or worry about your responses. *This is not a test*; there are no "wrong" answers.

- Was Burt typical of the homeless?
- What is it like being homeless?
- Why do people become homeless?
- How do homeless people adapt to a temporary shelter?
- What programs are effective in ending homelessness?

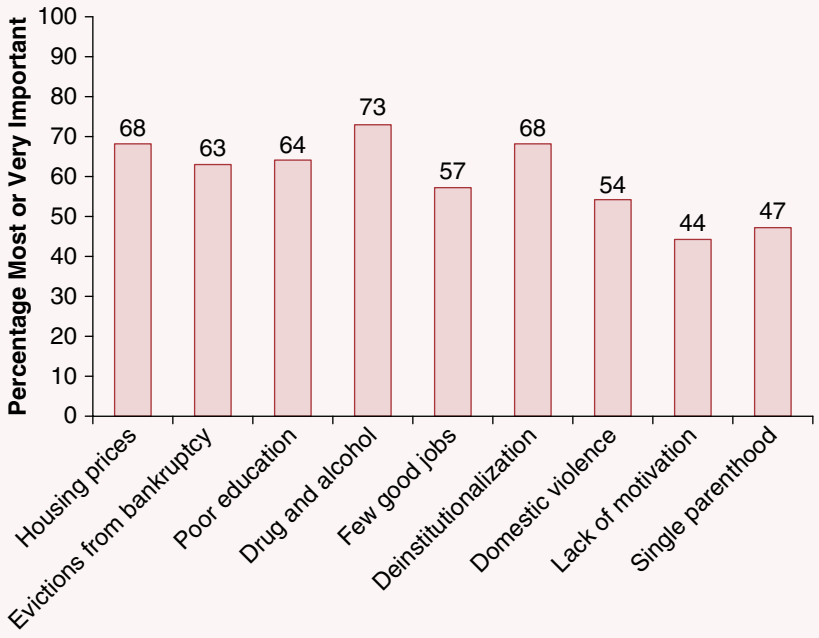
Do a few facts from the newspaper story give you enough information to answer these questions? Do you feel you need to know more about Burt, his friends, and the family he grew up in? Have you observed other homeless persons with whom you would compare Burt? What is the basis for your thoughts about the causes of homelessness? Have you worked in social service programs that provide some insight? How can you tell whether a program is effective? We began with just one person's experiences, and already our investigation is spawning more and more questions.

We cannot avoid asking questions about the social world, which is a complex place, and trying to make sense of our position in it—something of great personal importance. In fact, the more you begin to think like a potential social work researcher, the more questions will come to mind. But why does each question have so many possible answers? Surely, our perspective plays a role. One person may see a homeless individual as a victim of circumstances, another person may see the homeless as the failure of our society to care for its members, and a third person may see the same individual as a shiftless bum. When confronted with a homeless individual, one observer may stop to listen, another may recall a news story on street crime, and another may be reminded of her grandfather. Their different orientations will result in different answers to the questions prompted by the same individual or event.

When the questions concern not just one person, but many people or general social processes, the number of possible questions and the difficulties in answering them multiply. For example, consider the question of why people become homeless. Responses to a 2006 survey of New York City residents, summarized in Exhibit 1.1, illustrate the diverse sentiments that people have (Arumi, Yarrow, Ott, & Rochkind, 2007). Compare these answers with the opinion you recorded earlier. Was your idea about the causes of homelessness one of the more popular ones?

Answers to questions about the social world can vary given the particular details of what we observe or read about a situation. Would your answers be different if the newspaper article was about a family who had lost their home due to

Exhibit 1.1 **Popular Beliefs About Why People Become Homeless**



Source: Adapted from Arumi, Ana Maria, Andrew L. Yarrow, Amber Ott, and Jonathan Rochkind. 2007. *Compassion, Concern, and Conflicted Feelings: New Yorkers on Homelessness and Housing.* New York: Public Agenda.

foreclosure or a single parent with two children? Responses of large-city mayors to the 2013 Hunger and Homelessness Survey (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2013), summarized in Exhibit 1.2, demonstrate their differing opinions about what causes families to be homeless in comparison to individuals who are homeless.

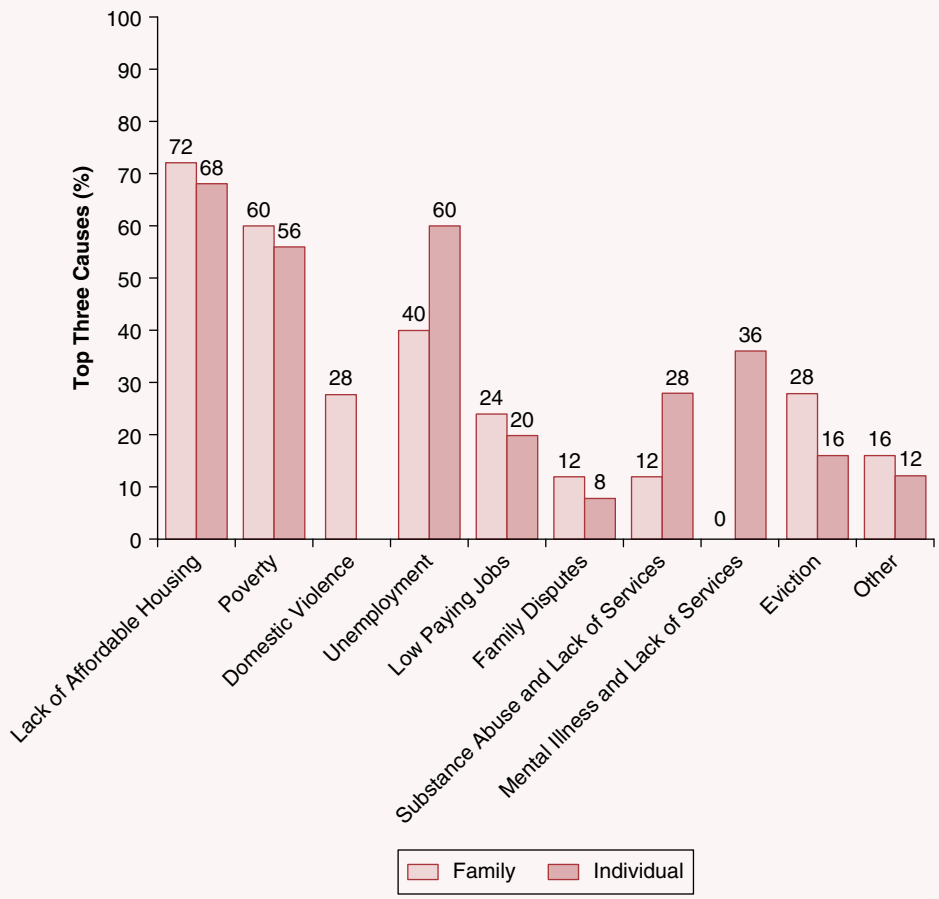
Answers to questions about the social world also vary because what people have "seen" varies. The New York City survey (Arumi et al., 2007) reflects this. The elderly were more likely than younger people to see drug and alcohol abuse as a significant cause of homelessness. People of color were more likely than White people to see the absence of good jobs as a key cause. Other studies have found that political perspectives and personal contact make a difference in how people perceive the causes of homelessness (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004).

Everyday Errors in Reasoning

People give different answers to questions about the social world for yet another reason: It is simply too easy to make errors in logic, particularly when we are analyzing the social world in which we are conscious participants. We can call some of these *everyday errors* because they occur so frequently in the nonscientific, unreflective discourse about the social world that we hear on a daily basis.

Our favorite example of everyday errors in reasoning comes from a letter to syndicated newspaper advice columnist Ann Landers. The letter was written by someone who had just moved with her two cats from the city to a house in the country. In the city, she had not let her cats outside and felt guilty about confining them. When they arrived in the country, she threw her back door open. Her two cats cautiously went to the door and looked outside for a while, then returned to the living room and lay down. Her conclusion was that people shouldn't feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors—even when cats have the chance, they don't really want to play outside.

Exhibit 1.2 **Causes of Homelessness for Individuals and Families**



Source: Adapted from U.S. Conference of Mayors, December 2012. Hunger and homelessness survey: A status report on hunger and homelessness in America's Cities, A 25-City survey.

Do you see this person's errors in reasoning?

- *Selective observation or inaccurate observation.* She observed the cats at the outside door only once.
- *Overgeneralization.* She observed only two cats, both of which previously were confined indoors.
- *Illogical reasoning.* She assumed that others feel guilty about keeping their cats indoors and that cats are motivated by emotions.
- *Resistance to change.* She was quick to conclude that she had no need to change her approach to the cats.
- *Adherence to authority.* She is looking to the "expert" for support for her conclusion.

You do not have to be a scientist or use sophisticated research techniques to avoid these errors in reasoning. If you recognize these errors for what they are and make a conscious effort to avoid them, you can improve your own reasoning. In the process, you will also be implementing the admonishments of your parents (or teacher or other adviser) to avoid stereotyping people, to avoid jumping to conclusions, and to look at the big picture. These are the same errors that the methods of social science research are designed to help us avoid.

Selective or Inaccurate Observation

We have to avoid **selective observation:** choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs. When we are inclined to criticize individuals or institutions, it is all too easy to notice their every failing. For example, if we are convinced in advance that all homeless persons are substance abusers, we can find many confirming instances. But what about homeless people who left abusive homes or lost jobs? If we acknowledge only the instances that confirm our predispositions, we are victims of our own selective observation. Exhibit 1.3 depicts the difference between overgeneralization and selective observation.

Selective observation Choosing to look only at things that are in line with our preferences or beliefs.

Inaccurate observation Observations based on faulty perceptions of empirical reality.

Our observations can be inaccurate. If a woman says she is *hungry* and we think she said she is *hunted*, we have made an **inaccurate observation.** If we think five people are standing on a street corner when actually seven are, we have made an inaccurate observation. Or our observations can be incomplete. If we see Burt sitting alone and drinking from a beer bottle, we would be wrong to conclude that he does not have any friends or that he likes to drink alone.

Such errors often occur in casual conversation and in everyday observation of the world around us. In fact, our perceptions do not provide a direct window onto the world around us because what we think we have sensed is not necessarily what we have seen (or heard, smelled, felt, or tasted). Even when our senses are functioning fully, our minds have to interpret what we have sensed (Humphrey, 1992). The optical illusion in Exhibit 1.4, which can be viewed as either two faces or a vase, should help you realize that perceptions involve interpretations. Different observers may perceive the same situation differently because they interpret it differently.

Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization occurs when we conclude that what we have observed or what we know to be true for some cases is true for all cases. We are always drawing conclusions about people and social processes from our own interactions with them, but we sometimes forget that our experiences are limited. The social (and natural) world is, after all, a complex place. We have the ability (and inclination) to interact with just a small fraction of the individuals who inhabit the social world, especially in a limited span of time.

Overgeneralization Occurs when we unjustifiably conclude that what is true for some cases is true for all cases.

Exhibit 1.3 The Difference Between Overgeneralization and Selective Observation

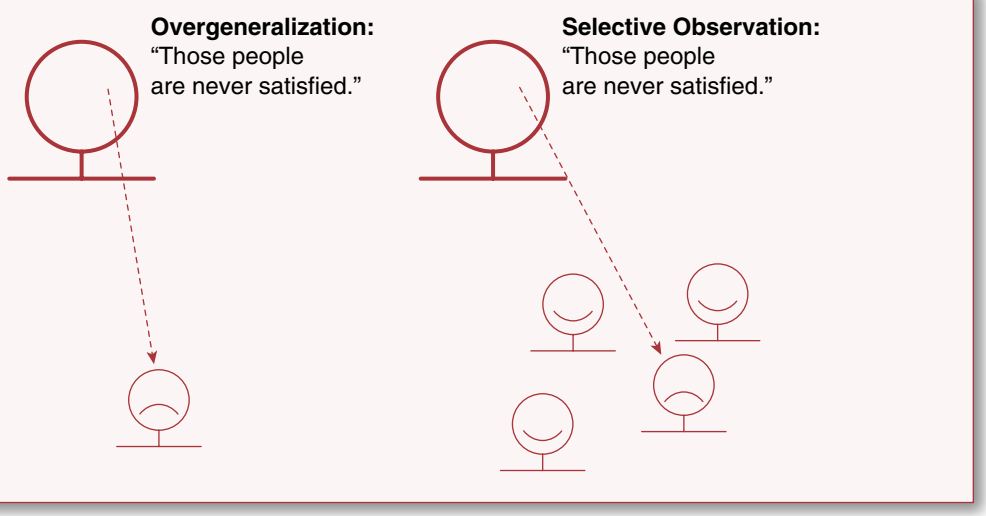


Exhibit 1.4 An Optical Illusion

If we had taken facts we learned about Burt, such as his alcohol abuse, and concluded that this problem is typical of homeless persons, we would have committed the error of overgeneralization.

Illogical Reasoning

When we prematurely jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions, we are using **illogical reasoning.** For example, it is not reasonable to propose that homeless individuals do not want to work if evidence indicates that the reason many are unemployed is a shortage of jobs or the difficulty of finding jobs for those unemployed because of mental or physical disabilities. However, an unquestioned assumption that everyone who *can* work *will* work is also likely to be misplaced. Logic that seems impeccable to one person can seem twisted to another—the problem usually is reasoning from different assumptions, rather than just failing to "think straight."

Illogical reasoning Occurs when we prematurely jump to conclusions or argue on the basis of invalid assumptions.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change, the reluctance to change our ideas in light of new information, may occur for a couple of reasons:

Ego-based commitments. We all learn to greet with some skepticism the claims by leaders of companies, schools, agencies, and so on that people in their organizations are happy, that revenues are growing, and that services are being delivered in the best possible way. We know how tempting it is to make statements about the social world that conform to our own needs, rather than to the observable facts. It can also be difficult to admit that we were wrong once we have staked out a position on an issue. For instance, we may want our experiences while volunteering in a shelter for homeless people to confirm our political stance on homelessness and therefore resist changing our beliefs in response to new experiences.

Excessive devotion to tradition. Some degree of devotion to tradition is necessary for the predictable functioning of society. Social life can be richer and more meaningful if it is allowed to flow along the paths charted by those who have preceded us. But too much devotion to tradition can stifle

Resistance to change The reluctance to change our ideas in light of new information.

adaptation to changing circumstances. When we distort our observations or alter our reasoning so that we can maintain beliefs that "were good enough for my grandfather, so they're good enough for me," we hinder our ability to accept new findings and develop new knowledge. In many agencies, those who want to reject an idea use those famous words: "But we've never done it that way."

Adherence to Authority

Adherence to authority Unquestioning acceptance of statements by authority figures such as parents, teachers, and professionals.

Sometimes it is difficult to change our ideas because someone in a position of authority has told us what is correct. **Adherence to authority** is given because we believe that the authority, the person making the claim, does have the knowledge. If we do not have the courage to evaluate critically the ideas of those in positions of authority, we will have little basis for complaint if they exercise their authority over us in ways we do not like. And if we do not allow new discoveries to call our beliefs into question, our understanding of the social world will remain limited. We once had a student in a social welfare history class who came back from Thanksgiving break saying, "You're wrong [about the impact of structural issues on economic well-being]. My parents told me that anyone can get ahead if they want to." In her eyes, her parents were right despite any evidence to the contrary.

Now take just a minute to reexamine the beliefs about homelessness that you recorded earlier. Did you grasp at a simple explanation even though reality is far more complex? Were your beliefs influenced by your own ego and feelings about your similarities to or differences from homeless persons? Are your beliefs perhaps based on stories you have heard about the "hobos" of an earlier era? Did you weigh carefully the opinions of political authorities or just accept or reject those opinions out of hand? Could knowledge of research methods help to improve your own understanding of the social world? Do you see some of the challenges faced by social science?

The Social Scientific Approach

Social science The use of scientific methods to investigate individuals, groups, communities, organizations, societies, and social processes; the knowledge produced by these investigations.

The scientific approach to answering questions about the social world is designed to greatly reduce these potential sources of error in everyday reasoning. **Social science** relies on logical and systematic methods to answer questions, and it does so in a way that allows others to inspect and evaluate its methods. In this way, scientific research develops a body of knowledge that is continually refined as beliefs are rejected or confirmed on the basis of testing empirical evidence.

Social work research relies on these methods to investigate treatment effectiveness, social conditions, organizational behavior, and social welfare policy. While we may do this in our everyday lives, social scientists develop, refine, apply, and report their understanding of the social world more systematically, or "scientifically," than the general public:

- Social science research methods can reduce the likelihood of overgeneralization by using systematic procedures for selecting individuals or groups to study that are representative of the individuals or groups to which we wish to generalize.
- To avoid illogical reasoning, social work researchers use explicit criteria for identifying causes and determining whether these criteria are met in a particular instance.
- Social science methods can reduce the risk of selective, inaccurate, or incomplete observation by requiring that we measure and sample phenomena systematically.
- Because they require that we base our beliefs on evidence that can be examined and critiqued by others, scientific methods lessen the tendency to develop answers about the social world from ego-based commitments, excessive devotion to tradition, and/or unquestioning respect for authority.

Social Work and the Social World

The methods of social science are an invaluable tool for social work researchers and practitioners at any level of practice. The nature of our social world is the starting point for the profession because much of what we do is in response to social, political, and economic conditions. Social work efforts, whether they are aimed at influencing or evaluating policy, working with communities, or engaging in programs to help individuals or groups, emerge in response to conditions in the social world. Our profession works with people from diverse backgrounds and promotes the social and economic participation of groups that lack access to full participation. Through systematic investigation, we begin to uncover the various dimensions of the social condition, the accuracy of our assumptions about what causes the social condition, the characteristics of people with a particular social status or social problem, and the effectiveness of our policies and programs to ameliorate the social problem.

Social policies are often designed based on assumptions about the causes of the problem. If we believe that homelessness is due to individual behavior or pathology—for example, that homeless individuals prefer separation from their friends and family, do not want to take advantage of economic opportunities, suffer from mental illness, or are alcohol and substance abusers—then policies will emerge that focus on treating these pathologies. However, if we believe that homelessness is due to structural problems—for example, the market's inability to provide enough reasonably paying jobs or problems in producing enough low-income housing—then government policies will emerge that might subsidize wages or encourage developers to build lower income housing. If we learn that the causes of homelessness are multidimensional, that there is a bit of reality to both perspectives, different government policies might emerge that both encourage housing alternatives and incorporate support services. Social work research aids us in the task of describing the characteristics of the homeless, their needs, and their prevalence, all of which can guide policy development and the distribution of resources.

The kinds of programs that human service agencies develop are also based on assumptions about the causes of a social problem (L. Martin & Kettner, 2010). If an agency assumes that homeless adults are alienated from society and suffer from emotional or substance abuse problems, then the agency might provide transitional housing with a variety of social services integrated into the program. In contrast, if the agency believes that homeless adults are simply in between jobs or new to a city and just need time to get started, then the agency might offer a short-term shelter. The tools of research allow social workers to examine the extent to which these assumptions are correct and to evaluate the effectiveness of these different programs.

Interventions in human service programs are related not only to assumptions about what causes the problem, but also to different beliefs about what is the appropriate treatment model. Two agencies might have the same set of assumptions about what causes a problem, but might use different practice models to treat the individual or group. The personal problems that Burt faced might have been addressed by using a social systems model of treatment or a cognitive model of treatment. The tools of research allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of different treatment models in different settings, with different problems, and with different subgroups of the population. For example, Russell Schutt's (2011) book *Homelessness, Housing, and Mental Illness* reports the findings of an evaluation of the effectiveness of group or independent housing for homeless persons.

Finally, social work research allows us to challenge perceptions and popular sentiment about those who are in need. Burt reflects common stereotypes about the homeless: They are male; they are substance abusers. Yet we now know, thanks to the work of many researchers, that increasing numbers of homeless people are women with children or people diagnosed with HIV; they have different kinds of needs than Burt, and they require different types of services and interventions in the kinds of housing options offered.

Social Work Research and Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has emerged in the past several years as a popular model for social work practice. EBP, with its roots in medicine, is described by Eileen Gambrill (2006) as an evolving "philosophy and process

Research In the News

WHY DID NEW YORK CITY'S HOMELESS POPULATION INCREASE?

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's annual count of homeless people reported a 1-year decrease of 4% nationally but this same survey found that the number of homeless people in New York City increased by 13%. Contrary to expectation, New York City's increase occurred at the same time that its economy had recovered. Much of the growth in New York City was attributed to an increase in homeless families who could no longer pay high rents.

For Further Thought

1. What would you like to research to better understand why homelessness is increasing in New York City?
2. How might you test the impact of federal budget cuts to support low income housing?

Source: Navarro (2013).

designed to forward effective use of professional judgment in integrating information regarding each client's unique characteristics, circumstances, preferences, and actions and external research findings" (p. 339). EBP's emergence is, in part, a reaction to an overreliance on professional claims about the effectiveness of social work practice. One of the failings of social work professional literature is "that it is rife with claims unaccompanied by evidence" (Gambrill, 2001, p. 167) and has based many of its claims on professional authority.

EBP is a clinical decision-making process integrating the best current research evidence to achieve a particular outcome; client values, client circumstances, and clinical expertise to make decisions about what intervention to choose (Straus, Richardson, Glasziou, & Haynes, 2005). Empirical evidence is necessary, but not sufficient; rather, social workers should utilize an intervention that fits the client's expectations and circumstances (Starin, 2006). What do each of these terms mean?

- *Best current research evidence.* Practitioners should use knowledge derived from research studies that provide evidence that has been obtained through systematic tests of its accuracy (Gambrill, 1999), that is, reliable and valid. Although there is debate about what kinds of research constitute "evidence," you will learn that it includes "any systematically collected information relevant to practice" (Pollio, 2006, p. 225). Therefore, quantitative studies (e.g., randomized clinical trials), qualitative methods (e.g., case studies, focus groups), and practitioner-collected information (e.g., single-subject designs) all provide evidence. Such studies provide information that can test the accuracy of assessment tools or the effectiveness of different interventions.

- *Client values.* Clients bring their own preferences, concerns, and expectations for service and treatment (Haynes, Devereaux, & Guyatt, 2002; Straus et al., 2005). Client preferences may impact the type of intervention used. Clients may prefer individual interventions as opposed to group interventions, or they may prefer in-home services or interventions rather than going to a congregate site or an agency for services. This is not limited to individual clients but may include larger client systems. Community interventions require knowledge about what is acceptable in a particular community, just as organizational interventions require an understanding of what is acceptable given the culture of the organization.

- *Client circumstances.* You can imagine the variety of circumstances that bring clients to seek social services. Some clients may be facing a crisis, others a long-standing problem; they may be voluntary clients, or they may be

court-ordered clients; they may live in rural areas, the suburbs, or urban communities. These are just some of the circumstances or situations that might be weighed in determining appropriate interventions.

- *Clinical expertise.* Clinical expertise involves using both past experiences with clients and clinical skills to assess and integrate the information learned from research studies, client values, and client circumstances (Haynes et al., 2002; Straus et al., 2005). Skilled social workers know how to find the relevant research literature, evaluate its accuracy, and determine its usefulness to a particular client or client system (Gambrill, 2001). They have communication skills needed to solicit client values and preferences, and, in turn, communicate to clients their options. Social workers are able to provide different interventions (or refer to appropriate providers) given a client's particular circumstances.

Another component of EBP is that social workers should provide clients with the information necessary to make decisions about services, including the effectiveness of the intervention, the client's role in the intervention, expectations of the client, and length of the intervention (Starin, 2006). Clients should be informed about the evidence, or lack of evidence, supporting a particular intervention. If there is no empirical evidence, social workers should provide the theoretical justification for the choice of service. Clients should also be told about alternative interventions and their relative effectiveness. With all of this information, clients can make informed decisions.

The EBP decision-making process includes five steps (Gray, Joy, Plath, & Webb, 2012; Straus, Richardson, Glasziou, & Haynes, 2011), though other authors have added a sixth step (Mullen, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2008) or reframed the steps by extending EBP beyond decision making to clinical practice (Drisko & Grady, 2012). The five steps adapted from Straus and her colleagues (2011, p. 3) are:

- *Step 1: Convert the need for information into an answerable question.* This step involves formulating the question based on what you learn through the client assessment process and might focus on assessment, intervention, or treatment (Mullin et al., 2008; Thyer, 2006). For example, you might ask, "Is a group home for mentally ill homeless individuals effective in retaining cognitive functioning?"

- *Step 2: Locate the best clinical evidence to answer the question.* A search for the best evidence might include finding research literature using the Internet, peer-review journals, and systematic reviews of treatment effectiveness. Your search may include clarifying diagnoses and the course of the problem (Drisko & Grady, 2012), but ultimately it will involve finding research about interventions and their effectiveness for a given problem.

- *Step 3: Critically evaluate the research evidence in terms of its validity, its clinical significance, and its usefulness.* You weigh the research designs used to produce the evidence, how much impact an intervention has on a particular outcome, and the applicability of the research to practice. As part of your evaluation, you must consider the similarity of the study participants to the characteristics of your clients.

- *Step 4: Integrate this critical appraisal of research evidence with one's clinical expertise and client values and circumstances.* In this stage, you should provide clients with the information necessary for the clients to make decisions regarding their preferences for treatment. This information includes what you have learned from the research about the relative effectiveness of different interventions, the client's role in the intervention process, and the length of the intervention (Starin, 2006).

- *Step 5: Evaluate one's effectiveness and efficiency in carrying out Steps 1 through 4 in order to improve one's efforts the next time.* You should reflect on the process identifying what went well and where there might be gaps in your ability to carry out the first four steps.

Although these steps may sound daunting, they are consistent with a social worker's ethical obligations as described in the National Association of Social Workers (2008) *Code of Ethics*: Enabling clients to make informed decisions is consistent with obtaining informed consent (1.03[a]); keeping up-to-date with relevant knowledge (4.01[b]);

utilizing interventions with an empirical basis (4.01[c]); and including evaluation and research evidence as part of professional practice (5.02[c]).

The challenge for social work researchers and social work practitioners is implementing evidence-based practice (Gray et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 2008; Proctor & Rosen, 2008). Mel Gray and colleagues' (2012) review of 11 studies of EBP implementation identified five barriers including (1) inadequate agency resources devoted to EBP, including time, funding, and access to research evidence; (2) inadequate skills and knowledge of research and EBP; (3) agency culture that required staff to follow agency guidelines; (4) nature of research and professional staff attitudes toward research; and (5) inadequate supervision.

Thomas Prohaska and Caryn Etkin (2010) expanded on these barriers, outlining some of the challenges in translating research to implementation in programs:

1. Researchers tend to focus on the effectiveness of the intervention in producing a desired outcome, with less consideration given to whether the effectiveness of the intervention translates to different settings. As a result practitioners wonder whether the findings have applicability to their setting.
2. Researchers often have specific criteria for selecting their participants and may even have criteria to exclude potential participants. Practitioners may conclude that the study population is unlike the clients they serve and, therefore, the findings are not applicable to their clients.
3. Researchers tend to focus on clinical outcomes. Practitioners and agency stakeholders are interested in achieving success with clinical outcomes, but they also have other factors to consider, including cost in achieving clinical outcomes as well as relationship to agency mission. Further, outcomes important to clients may differ from outcomes achieved in research studies.
4. Researchers suggest that there be treatment fidelity, in other words, that the delivery of the program follow a specific course of action. Practitioners may lack the documentation and materials to adequately implement the program as designed.

The translation of research findings to their application for practice cuts across disciplines and is not unique to social work. There are no easy answers to the implementation problem. We hope you are beginning to see the critical role that understanding the research process plays in providing services to client systems. You will need the skill to find relevant research literature and the ability to evaluate studies critically so that you can judge the findings and determine their usefulness to your practice and to your clients. Therefore, as you read this book, you will learn about research issues such as measurement, sampling, and research design; how to find research literature; and how to understand statistics. Each of these topics will contribute to your ability to carry out EBP.

Social Work Research in Practice

Although there are a great many studies of different phenomena, social conditions, impacts of different programs, and intervention methods, we can classify the purposes of these studies into four categories: description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation.

Descriptive Research

Defining and describing social phenomena of interest is a part of almost any research investigation, but descriptive research is often the primary focus of the initial research about some issue. **Descriptive research** typically involves the gathering of facts. Some of the central questions asked in research

Descriptive research Research in which social phenomena are defined and described.

on homelessness have been, Who is homeless? What are the needs of homeless people? and How many people are homeless? Measurement (the topic of Chapter 4) and sampling (Chapter 5) are central concerns in descriptive research. Survey research (Chapter 9) is often used for descriptive purposes.

Example: Who Are the Homeless?

For the last decade, Apt Associates and the University of Pennsylvania Center for Mental Health Policy and Services Research designed and implemented the *Annual Homeless Assessment Report* to address these questions (Solari, Cortes, Henry, Matthews, & Morris, 2014). One component of the study is to estimate the number of people who are homeless using emergency shelters, transitional housing, or permanent supportive housing during the 12-month period from October to September of the following year. To do so, they drew a nationally representative sample of communities participating in Continuums of Care (CoC). The data were retrieved from each setting's Homeless Management Information System, which was used to store data about individuals and families who were homeless. The estimate does not include individuals who remain unsheltered, reside in domestic violence shelters, or live in private or nonprofit long-term housing for people with a mental illness.

The design of the survey reinforces the importance of social scientific methods. Clear definitions were necessary, and the researchers had to carefully define many key concepts such as *continuums of care, homeless*, and *family*. The selection method had to ensure that the findings would be generalizable beyond the selected settings. Yet the findings could only be generalized to people found in residential assistance programs and not to other homeless individuals.

This study revealed the diversity among people who used a shelter program. In 2013, an estimated 1.42 million people used a shelter program; about 36% of people using a shelter were members of a shelter-using family; 63% were men; 22% were children under age 18; and 9.8% were veterans (Solari et al., 2014).

Exploratory Research

Exploratory research Seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them.

Exploratory research seeks to learn how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn "what is going on here" and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information. Research like this frequently involves qualitative methods, which are the focus of Chapter 10.

Example: How Do the Homeless Adapt to Shelter Life?

Among researchers interested in homelessness, one goal was to learn what it was like to be homeless and how homeless people made sense of their situation. In the past, homeless shelters were seen as temporary community solutions, but with homelessness growing, shelters were seen as necessary settings and, therefore, permanent. This change was accompanied by increased administrative oversight and rules to govern the residents. As a result of these changes, Sarah DeWard and Angela Moe (2010) wanted to learn about how the institutions operated and the ways residents adapted to administrative oversight. To answer these questions, DeWard and Moe conducted an exploratory study using observations and personal narratives of 20 women who were residents of a homeless shelter in a midwestern city. DeWard interviewed 20 women in private rooms in the shelter and spent about 100 hours over three months observing and interacting with staff and residents.

DeWard and Moe (2010) reported that the shelter had many rules and enforced a hierarchy between staff and residents. One rule was that any staff member could issue a point for violating the rules and residents receiving three points had to leave the shelter. This policy was a point of concern as expressed by one resident:

> One girl got wrote up because she's got four kids. She's a single mom, and all her kids are too young to go to day camp. So, she's got four kids, and they wrote her up because a job that she went to didn't hire her—but she's got

> four kids, four small kids . . . where are her kids supposed to go? They of course not gonna hire her because she got four kids taggin' along with her to the interview. (p. 120)

The authority given to staff reinforced power differences and was often perceived to be misused. One resident noted that

> [t]hey staff . . . they are something else! I think they pick and choose who they like and who let do certain stuff . . . . One woman got caught stealing . . . didn't nothing happen to her. Then somebody else bought take-out food and got written up. (p. 120)

DeWard and Moe (2010) found that the women choose one of four strategies to deal with the bureaucratic nature of the shelter. Some women simply submitted to the shelter, following the rules, accepting staff authority, and minding their own business. One woman, when asked if there was something she would change, commented that "I'm not going to say the [The Refuge] is perfect, but it is close to perfect" (p. 123). Other women adapted by emphasizing their spiritual self. They did not embrace the rules and structure but focused on their faith to guide their behavior. A third group adapted by creating a hierarchy among the residents—those who were homeless because of poor judgment or behavior and those who were houseless or temporarily homeless because of some event like losing a job. Finally, there were women who resisted the rules and authority of the staff, "I let them [staff] know they ain't gonna use none of that [rules and regulations] against me . . ." (p. 128). Such attitudes reinforced their desire to remain independent and autonomous even while living in the shelter.

DeWard and Moe (2010) concluded that the institutionalization of shelters had a negative impact on the residents. Women who were passive and more dependent were able to stay while women who tried to maintain their identities through resistance were terminated. Yet, for the women to ultimately return to the community successfully, they would need that self-sufficiency and sense of independence.

Explanatory Research

Many consider explanation the premier goal of any science. **Explanatory research** seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon. Homelessness researchers adopted explanation as a goal when they began to ask such questions as Why do people become homeless? and Does the unemployment rate influence the frequency of homelessness? Explanatory research depends on our ability to rule out other explanations for our findings, to demonstrate a time order between two events, and to show that the two events are related to each other. Research methods used to identify causes and effects are the focus of Chapter 6.

Explanatory research Seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in some other phenomenon.

Example: What Community-Level Factors Cause Homelessness?

Thomas Byrne and his colleagues (Byrne, Munley, Fargo, Montgomery, & Culhane, 2013) designed a study to understand why people become homeless. They were most interested in identifying what particular community-level structural factors caused homelessness. They were particularly interested in examining such factors as the housing market, local economic conditions, demographic composition of the community, adequacy of local safety net programs, local weather (climate) conditions, and the degree of residential mobility (transience). The researchers used data taken from the 2011 U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Annual Homeless Assessment; the sample comprised the count of people homeless or sheltered on a single night in the last 10 days of January 2009 across Continuums of Care (CoCs).

Their extensive analysis compared the metropolitan and rural CoCs separately. In metropolitan areas, the rate of people who were homeless was related to rent level, homeownership rate, population demographics like the proportion of single-parent households, Hispanic population, and baby-boomer population, and residential mobility. In rural areas, rents

and unemployment rate were positively related to the rate of people homeless while the proportion of the African American population was negatively related. These findings lead to a straightforward explanation of homelessness: "Homelessness has its roots in housing market dynamics and particularly in the difficulty in obtaining affordable housing" (p. 621).

Evaluation Research

Evaluation research, frequently referred to as *program evaluation* or *practice evaluation,* involves searching for practical knowledge in considering the implementation and effects of social policies and the impact of programs. Carol Weiss (1998) defines *evaluation* as "the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy" (p. 4). Evaluation research uses research methods and processes for a variety of different tasks, such as describing the clients using a particular program, exploring and assessing the needs of different communities or population groups, evaluating the effectiveness of a particular program, monitoring the progress of clients, or monitoring the performance of staff. In general terms, evaluation research may be descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory. These same tools provide a standard by which we can also evaluate the evaluation.

Evaluation research Research that describes or identifies the impact of social programs and policies.

Because evaluation research or program evaluation uses the same tools as other research, the two often become confused in the minds of readers and even researchers. The distinctions are important, particularly as they relate to the ethical conduct of research, which we discuss in Chapter 3, and, specifically, to institutional review processes to protect human subjects as required. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) *Distinguishing Public Health Research and Public Health Non-Research*, provides a useful distinction between the two based on the intent of the activity. The intent of research is to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, with the beneficiaries of the research usually being society and perhaps the study participants. The intent of evaluation is to assess whether a program is achieving its objectives with a specific group as a means to monitor and improve the program; therefore, it is not research. The beneficiaries of the information are the program providers and/or the clients receiving the services. An evaluation becomes research when it is designed to test a new, previously untested, or modified intervention, or when the intent of the evaluation becomes an effort to generate generalizable knowledge.

Example: Should Housing or Treatment Come First?

The problem of homelessness spawned many new government programs and, with them, evaluation research to assess the impact of these programs. Should housing or treatment come first for homeless people with serious mental illness and, in particular, for those persons who use and/or abuse drugs and alcohol? Deborah Padgett, Leyla Gulcur, and Sam Tsemberis (2006) addressed this policy dilemma as part of a 4-year longitudinal study comparing housing-first and treatment-first programs. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two groups: the *housing-first model*, in which the homeless are given immediate access to housing and offered an array of services, and abstinence is not a prerequisite, or the *treatment-first model*, in which housing is contingent on sobriety. People were randomly assigned to the two types of models so the researchers could be more confident that any differences found between the groups at the study's end had arisen after the subjects were assigned to the housing.

After 4 years, 75% of the housing-first clients were in a stable residence for the preceding 6 months, whereas only 50% of the treatment-first group had a stable residence. In addition, the researchers found that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups on drug or alcohol use. The researchers concluded that the requirement for abstinence had little impact among mentally ill respondents whose primary concern was housing.

Alternative Research Orientations

In addition to deciding on the type of research they will conduct, social work researchers must choose among alternative orientations to research. Some researchers adopt the same orientation in their research, but others vary

their orientation based on the particular research question. It is also possible to combine these alterative orientations. We introduce three important questions that must be considered when you begin a research project: (1) Will the research use primary quantitative or qualitative methods, or some combination of the two? (2) Will your guiding philosophy in the research lean to *positivist*, with a focus on social realities, or lean to *constructivist*, with the focus on the meanings that people create? (3) What is the role of the researcher?

Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods

Did you notice the difference between the types of data the studies used? The primary data collected in the study for HUD (Solari et al., 2014) were counts about the homeless population, how many had families, their gender, and other characteristics. These data were numerical, so we say that this study used **quantitative methods**. Byrne et al.'s (2012) study and the Padgett et al. (2006) study also used quantitative methods; they reported their findings as percentages and other statistics that summarized homelessness. In contrast, DeWard and Moe (2010) used personal narratives—original text—to understand life in a homeless shelter; because they used actual text, and not counts or other quantities, we say that their works used **qualitative methods**.

Quantitative methods Methods such as surveys and experiments that record variation in social life in terms of categories that vary in amount. Data that are treated as quantitative are either numbers or attributes that can be ordered in terms of magnitude.

Qualitative methods Methods such as participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories predetermined by the researcher. These methods typically involve exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, an orientation to social context, human objectivity, and the meanings attached by participants to events.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods involves more than just the type of data collected. Quantitative methods are most often used when the motives for research are explanation, description, or evaluation. Exploration is most often the motive for using qualitative methods, although researchers also use these methods for descriptive and evaluative purposes as well. The goals of quantitative and qualitative researchers may also differ. Whereas quantitative researchers generally accept the goal of developing an understanding that correctly reflects what is actually happening in the real world, some qualitative researchers instead emphasize the goal of developing an "authentic" understanding of a social process or social setting. An authentic understanding is one that reflects *fairly* the various perspectives of participants in that setting.

Studies that combine elements of quantitative methods and qualitative methods such as the manner in which data are collected or how the data are analyzed use **mixed methods** (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). In mixed-method studies, the data are both numerical and text. Mixed-methods research is used when researchers want to view the same phenomena from different perspectives, want both breadth and depth about a topic, seek additional information to elaborate or clarify what they have learned about a social process, or to explore new or understudied phenomena and then test the findings. Researchers using mixed methods tend to take a pragmatic view that neither objective reality nor a socially constructed reality alone explains social processes; rather there are interactions between the two types of reality (Biesta, 2010). A recent study of homeless young adults (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012) was designed to identify predictors of employment status (quantitative study using a survey with 238 respondents) and to understand the challenges homeless youth face in finding employment and staying employed (qualitative study using focus groups with 20 homeless individuals).

Mixed methods The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in a research study.

Positivist or Constructivist Philosophies

A researcher's philosophical perspective on reality and on the appropriate role of the researcher will also shape methodological preferences. Researchers with a *positivist philosophy* believe that there is an objective reality that exists apart from the perceptions of those who observe it; the goal of science is to better understand this reality. This is the philosophy traditionally associated with natural science, with the expectation that there are universal laws of behavior, and with the belief that scientists must be objective and unbiased to see reality clearly (Weber, 1949).

Positivism The belief that there is a reality that exists quite apart from our own perception of it, that it can be understood through observation and that it follows general laws.

Postpositivism The belief that there is an empirical reality, but that our understanding of it is limited by its complexity and by the biases and other limitations of researchers.

Intersubjective agreement Agreement between social work researchers about the nature of reality; often upheld as a more reasonable goal of science than certainty about an objective reality.

Positivism asserts that a well-designed test of a theoretically based prediction—the test of the prediction that young adults with more education will be tolerant of other ethnic groups, for example—can move us closer to understanding actual social processes. Quantitative researchers are often guided by a positivist philosophy.

Postpositivism is a philosophy of reality that is closely related to positivism because it also assumes that there is an external, objective reality, but postpositivists acknowledge the complexity of this reality and the limitations of the researchers who study it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For example, postpositivists may worry that researchers, who are heavily oriented to a particular treatment modality, such as cognitive behavior therapy, might be biased in favor of finding positive results when evaluating it. As a result, postpositivists do not think we can ever be sure that scientific methods allow us to perceive objective reality. Instead, they believe that the goal of science is to achieve **intersubjective agreement** among scientists about the nature of reality (Wallace, 1983). We can be more confident in the ability of the community of social researchers to develop an unbiased account of reality than in the ability of any individual social scientist to do so (Campbell & Russo, 1999).

Qualitative research is often guided by a different philosophy: **constructivism**. Constructivist social scientists believe that social reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand the meanings people give to reality, not to determine how reality works apart from these constructions. This philosophy rejects the positivist belief that there is a concrete, objective reality that scientific methods help us to understand (Lynch & Bogen, 1997); instead, constructivists believe that people construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others and that this is as true of scientists as it is of everyone else.

Constructivism A perspective that emphasizes how different stakeholders in social settings construct their beliefs.

Interpretivism The belief that reality is socially constructed and that the goal of social scientists is to understand what meanings people give to that reality.

Constructivism emphasizes that different stakeholders in a social setting construct different beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It gives particular attention to the different goals of researchers and other participants in a research setting and seeks to develop a consensus among participants about how to understand the focus of inquiry (Sulkunen, 2008). The constructivist research report will highlight different views of the social program or other issue and explain how a consensus can be reached among participants. **Interpretivism** is a related research philosophy that emphasizes the importance of understanding subjective meanings people give to reality while believing that reality itself is socially constructed.

Here's the basic argument: All empirical data we collect come to us through our own senses and must be interpreted with our own minds. This suggests that we can never be sure that we have understood reality properly, that we can, or that our understandings can really be judged more valid than someone else's. Concerns like this have begun to appear in many areas of social science and have begun to shape some research methods. From this standpoint, the goal of validity becomes meaningless: "Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 128).

Critical theory similarly focuses on examining structures, patterns of behavior, and meanings but rests on the premise that power differences, often manifested by discrimination and oppression, have shaped these structures and patterns. What is observed and described at a particular moment in time is the result of differential power relationships that have solidified over time. How people are socially located in a particular situation will construct their meanings and interests (Keenan, 2004). Researchers committed to this perspective see research as a way to challenge societal structures that reinforce oppression (Mertens, Bledsoe, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2010).

Critical theory A research focus on examining structures, patterns of behavior, and meanings but rests on the premise that power differences, often manifested by discrimination and oppression, have shaped these structures and patterns.

Feminist research Research with a focus on women's lives and often including an orientation to personal experience, subjective orientations, and the researcher's standpoint.

Feminist research is a term used to refer to a perspective on research that can involve many different methods (Reinharz, 1992). The feminist perspective on research includes the interpretivist and constructivist elements of concern with personal experience and subjective feelings and with the researcher's position and standpoint (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, & Leavy, 2007). The emphasis is on the importance of viewing the social world as complex and multilayered, of sensitivity to the impact of social differences—of being an "insider" or an "outsider," and of being concerned with the researcher's position. Patricia Hill Collins (2008) suggests that researchers who are sensitive to their outsider role within a social situation may have unique advantages: "Outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see" (p. 317).

Which philosophy makes the most sense to you? Do you agree with positivists and postpositivists that scientific methods can help us understand the social world as it is, not just as we would like to think it is? Does the constructivist focus on meanings sound like a good idea? What about integrating research with empowerment strategies of feminist research?

There is no easy answer to which is the correct philosophy. There has been an ongoing debate among social work researchers and educators about which is the appropriate philosophical approach. We argue that there is value to both of these approaches and there are good reasons to prefer a research philosophy that integrates some of the differences between these philosophies (Smith, 1991). Researchers influenced by a positivist philosophy should be careful to consider how their own social background shapes their research approaches and interpretations, just as constructivist researchers caution us to do. We also need to be sensitive to the insights that can be provided by other stakeholders in the settings we investigate. Researchers influenced more by a constructivist philosophy should be careful to ensure that they use rigorous procedures to check the trustworthiness of their interpretations of data (Riessman, 2008).

Researcher or Participatory Orientation

Whose prescriptions should specify how the research will be conducted? Much social work research is driven by the researcher who specifies the research question, the applicable theory or theories, and the variables to be investigated. The typical social science approach emphasizes the importance of the researcher's expertise and maintenance of autonomy.

Community-based participatory research A type of research in which the researcher involves some community and/or organizational members as active participants throughout the study.

Community-based participatory research (or *participatory action research*) encourages social work researchers to get out of the academic rut and bring values into the research process. Rosemary Sarri and Catherine Sarri (1992) suggest that participatory action research "seeks to reduce the distinction between the researcher and the researched by incorporating the latter in a collaborative effort of knowledge creation that will lead to community betterment and empowerment" (p. 100). Therefore, the researcher involves as active participants members of the community or setting being studied, including designing questions, gathering information, analyzing data, making recommendations or conclusions, and/or disseminating the findings.

Hidenori Yamatani, Aaron Mann, and Patricia Wright (2000) used principles of participatory action research to conduct a needs assessment focused on unemployment in a working-class neighborhood in Pittsburgh. To conduct this study, the social work researchers knew they had to directly involve the community or their efforts would be unsuccessful. They chose to become research advisers assisting community members, who, in turn, defined the overall parameters of the study, designed the questionnaires, collected the data, coded the data, reviewed the findings to develop the report's recommendations, and reviewed and approved the written report. The researchers provided their advice on different steps in the research process, trained community members in various research-related tasks, analyzed the data, and wrote the report. The outcome was a report (and its recommendations) that had both community and organizational support.

Social Work Research in a Diverse Society

Social work research is conducted in an increasingly diverse society. In the past, diversity was primarily associated with race and ethnicity (National Association of Social Workers, 2001; Van den Berg & Crisp, 2004) but now includes "people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, ages, and physical and mental abilities" (National Association of Social Workers, 2001, p. 8). Although there is much that these groups share, there is also an increased awareness that there are distinct cultural, social, and historical experiences shaping and influencing group experiences. Just as social work practitioners are expected to engage in culturally competent practice, they must recognize that cultural norms impact the research process, whether it is the willingness to participate in research activities, the meaning ascribed to abstract terms and constructs, the way data are collected, or the interpretation of the findings. The failure by researchers to adequately address the cultural context impacts in different ways the research process and, ultimately, the validity and generalizability of research findings.

Historically, women and ethnic minorities have been underrepresented in research studies and, more specifically, in clinical studies testing the impact of health and mental health interventions. The reluctance of different groups to participate in research may be due to different reasons, such as distrust of the motives of the researchers (Beals, Manson, Mitchell, Spicer, & AI-SUPERPFP Team, 2003; Sobeck, Chapleski, & Fisher, 2003), historical experiences, not understanding the research process, not seeing any benefit to participation (Beals et al., 2003), and misuse of findings to the detriment of their communities (Sobeck et al., 2003). Inadequate representation makes it more difficult to conclude, for example, that the results from a primarily White sample can be generalized to other ethnic groups.

Cultural differences given to the meaning of different concepts, particularly psychological concepts, can also impact the validity of the research. Social work researchers use a variety of measurement instruments, but often people of color, women, low-income people, and other groups have not been adequately represented in the development or testing of these measurement instruments (Witkin, 2001). It is important to determine whether the concepts being measured have the same meaning and are manifested in the same way across different cultural groups.

Measurement bias can result in misidentifying the prevalence of a condition and result in group differences that may not actually exist. For example, some measures of depression have been criticized as inappropriate when used with older adults (Sharp & Lipsky, 2002), African Americans (Ayalon & Young, 2003; Zauszniewski, Fulton Picot, Debanne, Roberts, & Wykle, 2002), and women (Romans, Tyas, Cohen, & Silverstone, 2007; Sigmon et al., 2005). Because these measures may not be accurate, they may overestimate the prevalence of depression for each of these groups.

The quality of information obtained from surveys is in part dependent on the questions that are asked; there is an assumption that respondents share a common understanding of the meaning of the question and willingness or unwillingness to answer the question. Yet questions may have different meanings to different groups, may not be culturally appropriate, and even when translated into a different language may lack equivalent connotations (Pasick, Stewart, Bird, & D'Onofrio, 2001). For example, Rena Pasick and her colleagues (2001) found that the concept of *routine checkup* was unfamiliar to their sample of Chinese Americans, there was no similar concept in the Vietnamese language, and some Latina respondents did not understand the question, nor could they offer alternative language. The researchers had to find other ways to ask the question to get the information they desired.

Data must be analyzed carefully. Often ethnic and racial minorities are compared to the majority population; in doing so, we may be treating any differences as deficits when in fact they reflect cultural differences. In comparison studies, it is important to control for the impact of socioeconomic status given disparities in economic well-being. How data are reported must respect confidentiality. Beals and her colleagues (2003) noted that American Indian and Alaska Native communities had experienced research efforts that resulted in negative stereotypes and publicity for their communities; ensuring confidentiality is not limited to the individual respondent but also to the community.

As you can see from this brief introduction, the norms that develop within population subgroups have an impact that cuts across the research process. As you read each chapter, you will learn both the kinds of questions that researchers ask and the strategies they use to ensure that their research is culturally competent.

Conclusion

The studies we have highlighted in this chapter are only several of the dozens of large studies of homelessness done since 1980, but they illustrate some of the questions that social science research can address, several different methods that researchers can use, and ways that research can inform public policy. Each of the studies was designed to reduce the errors common in everyday reasoning:

- A clear definition of the population of interest in each study and the selection of a broad, representative sample of that population (e.g., Solari et al., 2014) increased the researchers' ability to draw conclusions without overgeneralizing findings to groups to which they did not apply.
- The use of surveys in which each respondent was asked the same set of questions (e.g., Padgett et al., 2006) reduced the risk of selective or inaccurate observation, as did careful and regular note taking by the field researchers (e.g., DeWard & Moe, 2010).
- The risk of illogical reasoning was reduced by carefully describing each stage of the research, clearly presenting the findings, and carefully testing the basis for cause-and-effect conclusions (e.g., Byrne et al., 2012; Padgett et al., 2006).
- Resistance to change was reduced by designing an innovative type of housing and making an explicit commitment to evaluate it fairly (e.g., Padgett et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, we would be less than honest if we implied that we enter the realm of beauty, truth, and light when we engage in social work research or when we base our opinions only on the best available social research. Research always has some limitations and some flaws (as does any human endeavor), and our findings are always subject to differing interpretations. Social work research permits us to see more, to observe with fewer distortions, and to describe more clearly to others the basis for our opinions, but it will not settle all arguments. Others will always have differing opinions, and some of those others will be social scientists and social workers who have conducted their own studies and drawn different conclusions. Are people encouraged to get off welfare by requirements that they get a job? Some research suggests that they are, other research finds no effect of work incentives, and one major study found positive but short-lived effects. More convincing answers must await better research, more thoughtful analysis, or wider agreement on the value of welfare and work.

However, even in areas of research that are fraught with controversy, where social scientists differ in their interpretations of the evidence, the quest for new and more sophisticated research has value. What is most important for improving understanding of the social world is not the result of any particular study, but the accumulation of evidence from different studies of related issues. By designing new studies that focus on the weak points or controversial conclusions of prior research, social scientists contribute to a body of findings that gradually expands our knowledge about the social world and resolves some of the disagreements about it.

We hope this first chapter has given you an idea of what to expect in the rest of the book. Social science provides a variety of methods to reduce the errors common in everyday reasoning. We explore different research methods to understand how they improve our ability to come to valid conclusions, which, in turn, can inform social work practice. Whether you plan to conduct your own research projects, read others' research reports, or just think about and act in the social world, knowing about research will give you greater confidence in your own opinions; improve your ability to evaluate others' opinions; and encourage you to refine your questions, answers, and methods of inquiry about the social world. Having the tools of research can guide you to improve the social programs in which you work, to provide better interventions with your clients, and to monitor their progress.

Key Terms

Adherence to authority 7
Community-based participatory research 17
Constructivism 16
Critical theory 16
Descriptive research 11
Evaluation research 14
Explanatory research 13
Exploratory research 12
Feminist research 17
Illogical reasoning 6
Inaccurate observation 5
Interpretivism 16
Intersubjective agreement 16
Mixed methods 15
Overgeneralization 5
Positivism 16
Postpositivism 16
Qualitative methods 15
Quantitative methods 15
Resistance to change 6
Selective observation 5
Social science 7

Highlights

- Social science research differs from the ordinary process of thinking about our experiences by focusing on broader questions that involve people outside our immediate experience and issues about why things happen.
- Social science is the use of logical, systematic, documented methods to investigate individuals, societies, and social processes, as well as the knowledge produced by these investigations.
- Five common errors in reasoning are overgeneralization, selective or inaccurate observation, illogical reasoning, resistance to change, and adherence to authority. These errors result from the complexity of the social world, subjective processes that affect the reasoning of researchers and the people they study, researchers' self-interest, and unquestioning acceptance of tradition or of those in positions of authority.
- Social science methods are used by social work researchers and practitioner-researchers to uncover the nature of a social condition, to test the accuracy of assumptions about the causes of the social condition, to identify populations at risk, and to test and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, programs, and policies designed to ameliorate the social condition.
- Social work research cannot resolve value questions or provide permanent, universally accepted answers.
- Quantitative and qualitative methods structure research in different ways and are differentially appropriate for diverse research situations. They may be combined in research projects.
- Positivism and postpositivism are research philosophies that emphasize the goal of understanding the real world; these philosophies guide most quantitative researchers.
- Constructivism emphasizes the importance of exploring and representing the ways in which different stakeholders in a social setting construct their beliefs. Interpretivism is a related research philosophy that emphasizes an understanding of the meaning people attach to their experiences.
- Cultural norms impact the research process from the willingness to participate in research, the meaning of terms, the way data are collected, or the interpretation of the findings.

Discussion Questions

1. Select a social issue that interests you. List four beliefs about this social issue, for example, its causes. What is the source of these beliefs? What type of policy, program, and intervention for helping resolve this social issue would be consistent with your beliefs?
2. Social work research using different methods can yield differing results about the same topic. Pick a social issue and describe how quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods might lead to different results.
3. Do you favor the positivist/postpositivist or interpretivist/constructivist philosophy as a guide for social work research? Explain your position.

Practice Exercises

1. Find a report of social work research in an article in a daily newspaper. What were the major findings? How much evidence is given about the measurement validity, generalizability, and causal validity of the findings? What additional design features might have helped to improve the study's validity?
2. Read the abstracts (initial summaries) of each article in a recent issue of a major social work journal. (Ask your instructor for some good journal titles.) On the basis of the abstract only, classify each research project represented in the articles as primarily descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative. Note any indications that the research focused on other types of research questions.

Web Exercise

1. Prepare a 5- to 10-minute class presentation on the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report *Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve* (www.huduser.org/portal/publications/homeless/homelessness/contents.html). Write up a brief outline for your presentation, including information on study design, questions asked, and major findings.

Developing a Research Proposal

Will you develop a research proposal in this course? If so, you should begin to consider your alternatives.

1. What topic would you focus on if you could design a social work–related research project without any concern for costs or time? What are your reasons for studying this topic? Develop four questions that you might investigate about the topic you just selected. Each question should reflect a different research motive: description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation. Be specific.
2. Which question most interests you? Would you prefer to attempt to answer that question with quantitative, qualitative methods or mixed methods? Why?

A Question of Ethics

Throughout the book, we discuss the ethical challenges that arise in social work research. At the end of each chapter, we ask you to consider some questions about ethical issues related to that chapter's focus. We introduce this critical topic formally in Chapter 3, but we begin here with some questions for you to ponder.

1. The chapter began with a brief description from a news article of a homeless person named Burt. We think stories like this can provide important information about the social problems that social workers confront. But what would *you* do if you were interviewing homeless persons and one talked of taking his own life out of despair? What if he was only thinking about it? Can you suggest some guidelines for researchers?
2. You read in this chapter that Deborah Padgett, Leyla Gulcur, and Sam Tsemberis (2006) found that their housing-first program enabled homeless persons to spend more time housed than those required first to undergo treatment for substance abuse. If you were these researchers, would you announce your findings in a press conference and encourage relevant agencies to eliminate abstinence requirements for homeless persons with substance abuse problems? When would you recommend that social work researchers urge adoption of new policies based on research findings? How strong do you think the evidence should be?

CHAPTER 2

The Process of Social Work Research

Intimate partner violence continues to be major problem in our society. In a 2010 U. S. survey of 16,507 people sponsored by the Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 35.6% of women and 28.5% of men said they had experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner at some time in their lives (Black et al., 2011). Nearly 4.8 million women annually experience some form of physical violence (Breiding et al., 2014). In 2012, 1,487 women were killed by a male they knew; 924 were wives or intimate partners (Violence Policy Center, 2014). And the cost to society has been estimated to be as high as $8.3 billion (Max, Rice, Finkelstein, Bardwell, & Leadbetter, 2004).

Back in 1981, the Police Foundation and the Minneapolis Police Department began a landmark experiment to determine whether arresting accused spouse abusers on the spot would deter repeat incidents. The study's results, which were widely publicized, indicated that arrest did have a deterrent effect. In part because of this, the percentage of urban police departments that made arrest the preferred response to complaints of domestic violence rose from 10% in 1984 to 90% in 1988 (Sherman, 1992). Researchers in six other cities conducted studies like the Minneapolis experiment to determine whether changing the location would result in different outcomes. The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment, the studies modeled after it, and the related controversies provide many examples for a systematic overview of the social research process.

In this chapter we introduce how you begin the process of social work research. We consider in some detail the techniques required to decide what to study: formulating research questions, finding information, and reviewing prior research. Next, we discuss the role of social theory and, when appropriate, formulating specific testable hypotheses. We then discuss different social research standards for social work research as a prelude to the details about these stages in subsequent chapters. By the chapter's end, you should be ready to formulate a research question, design a general strategy for answering this question, and critique previous studies that addressed this question.

Social Work Research Questions

A social work research question is a question that you seek to answer through the collection and analysis of firsthand, verifiable, empirical data. It is not a question about who did what to whom, but a question about people interacting with individuals, groups, or organizations; about tendencies in community change; or about the impact of different interventions. Think of the questions you might ask about intimate partner violence. How many women and men are victims of intimate partner violence? Are their age, gender, ethnicity, or income differences associated with intimate partner violence? Have rates of intimate partner violence changed since 1981? What are the causes of intimate partner violence? Do batterer intervention groups reduce subsequent battering? What are the costs of intimate partner violence to the United States? These questions are just a few of the many possible questions about domestic violence.

So many research questions are possible that it is more of a challenge to specify what does not qualify as a social work question. But that does not mean it is easy to specify a research question. Formulating a good research question can be surprisingly difficult. We can break the process into three stages: (1) identifying one or more questions for study, (2) refining the questions, and (3) evaluating the questions.

Identifying Social Work Research Questions

Social work research questions may emerge from your own experience. One experience might be membership in a youth group, another might be volunteering in a woman's shelter, or yet another might be a friend's death. You may find yourself asking questions like these: In what ways do adolescents benefit from youth group membership? Does domestic violence change a person's trust in others? What are effective methods of treating bereavement or loss?

Some research questions may emerge from your work or field practicum experiences. You might wonder about the effectiveness of the interventions used at your practicum site. You may ask yourself what causes some of the issues you see, such as what causes domestic violence or what family patterns seem related to school behavioral problems.

You also might begin to think about how social policies affect the clients your agency serves or the agency itself. Has the advent of managed care changed the kinds of services provided by mental health agencies? How do Temporary Assistance to Needy Families recipients who are going back to work manage their child-care needs?

Other researchers may pose interesting questions for you to study. Most research articles highlight unresolved issues and end with suggestions for additional research. The authors may suggest repeating the study with other samples in other settings or locations, or they may suggest that the research could have been improved by using a different design or instrument. They may suggest examining other variables to determine whether they explain a relationship. Any issue of a social work journal is likely to have articles with comments that point toward unresolved issues.

Some social work researchers find the source of their research questions in testing social theory. For example, you may find rational choice theory to be a useful approach to understanding diverse forms of social behavior because you feel that people seem to make decisions on the basis of personal cost-benefit calculations. You may ask whether rational choice theory can explain why some elderly people choose to participate in Supplemental Security Income and other eligible elderly people do not participate.

Finally, some research questions have very pragmatic sources. You may focus on a research question posed by someone else because it seems to be to your advantage to do so. Some social scientists conduct research on specific questions posed by a funding source in what is termed a *request for proposals* (RFP). Or you may learn that the social workers in the homeless shelter where you volunteer need help with a survey to learn about client needs, which becomes the basis for another research question.

Refining Social Work Research Questions

It is more challenging to focus on a problem of manageable size than it is to come up with an interesting question. We are often interested in much more than we can reasonably investigate with limited time and resources. Researchers may worry about staking a research project (and thereby a grant or a grade) on a single problem, so they address several research questions at once. Also, it might seem risky to focus on a research question that may lead to results discrepant with your own cherished assumptions. The prospective commitment of time and effort for some research questions may seem overwhelming, resulting in a certain degree of paralysis.

The best way to avoid these problems is to gradually develop the research question. Do not keep hoping that the perfect research question will just spring forth from your pen. Instead, develop a list of possible research questions as you go along. At the appropriate time, look through this list for the ones that appear more than once. Narrow your list to the most interesting, most workable candidates. Repeat this process as long as it helps to improve your research question.

Evaluating Social Work Research Questions

What makes a research question good? You should evaluate the best candidate in terms of three criteria: social importance, scientific relevance, feasibility given the time and resources available (G. King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994).

Social Importance

Social work research is not a simple undertaking, so it is hard to justify the expenditure of effort and resources unless we focus on a substantive area that is important. There are so many substantive areas related to social work that creating an all-encompassing list is difficult. You need to feel motivated to carry out the study; there is little point in trying to answer a question that does not interest you.

For most research projects, you should consider whether the research question is important to other people. Will an answer to the research question make a difference in improving the well-being of people? Social work research is not wanting for important research questions. A recent issue of *Research on Social Work Practice* included articles about

the impact of an intervention on reducing children's aggressive behaviors; a summary of the effect of 15 interventions designed to reduce adolescent marijuana use; the effectiveness of a supervisor competency training on supervisory relationships with staff, job performance, and promoting professional development; and validating a scale to assess evidence-based practice research. All of these articles addressed research questions about social work interventions, and all raised new questions for additional research. Other social work journals address macro practice topics such as community building, organizational behavior, or policy research.

Scientific Relevance

Every research question should be grounded in both social work and social science literature. Whether we formulate a research question because we have been stimulated by an academic article or because we want to investigate a current social problem, we should turn to the literature to find out what has already been learned about this question. You can be sure that some prior study is relevant to almost any research question you can conceive.

The Minneapolis experiment was built on a substantial body of contradictory theorizing about the impact of punishment on criminality (Sherman & Berk, 1984). Deterrence theory predicted that arrest would deter individuals from repeat offenses; labeling theory predicted that arrest would make repeat offenses more likely. One prior experimental study of this issue was about juveniles; studies among adults had yielded inconsistent findings. Clearly, the Minneapolis researchers had good reason to conduct another study. Any new research question should be connected in this way to past research.

Feasibility

You must be able to conduct the study with the time and resources you have available. If time is short, questions that involve long-term change may not be feasible unless you can find data that have already been collected. For example, it is difficult to study the impact of antidrug education groups offered in middle school on subsequent adult drug use. Another issue is access to identified people or groups. It may be difficult to gain access to participants with particular characteristics. If you were interested in seeking people with a mental health diagnosis who live in your community, you might have to do an excessive amount of screening. Although you could turn to a mental health provider, the agency might not allow you access to its clients. You must consider whether you will have any additional resources, such as research funding or other researchers with whom to collaborate. Remember that there are severe limits on what one person can accomplish. However, you may be able to piggyback your research onto a larger research project. You also must take into account the constraints you face due to your schedules and other commitments, as well as your skill level.

The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment shows how ambitious social research questions can be when a team of seasoned researchers secures the backing of influential groups. The project required hundreds of thousands of dollars, the collaboration of many social scientists and criminal justice personnel, and the volunteer efforts of 41 Minneapolis police officers. But many worthwhile research questions can be investigated with much more limited resources.

Consider Social Diversity When Formulating a Question

As you consider alternative research questions, it is important to remember that we live in a very diverse world. The language you use to conceptualize the research question may reflect age, gender, ethnic, or heterosexual bias or reinforce societal stereotypes. For example, questions about older adults sometimes reflect negative social stereotypes of the elderly, suggesting that aging is a problem by focusing on decline and deficits (Schaie, 1993). Terms like *old* or *elderly* may negatively affect attitudes toward older adults; neutral phrases such as "adults between 70 and 85 years of age" have less of a negative connotation (Polizzi & Millikin, 2002).

There are similar concerns when developing questions about ethnic groups. Sometimes questions about ethnic groups are characterized in terms of deficits as opposed to strengths, reinforcing negative stereotypes about ethnic groups. In research studies that compare ethnic groups, there is a tendency to phrase questions in ways that suggest the cultural superiority of one group in contrast to another group. Yet, these differences or gaps may reflect culturally appropriate responses.

While there has been a greater recognition of avoiding questions that reflect a heterosexist bias, such biases still persist (Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003). A heterosexist or genderist bias occurs when research questions "ignore the existence of LGBT people, devalue or stigmatize them, or assume that negative characteristics observed in them are caused by their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression" (J. I. Martin & Meezan, 2003, p. 195). For example, we think of a family as consisting of two parents of opposite genders, yet we know that families take on many different forms. Using a narrow definition of family reflecting societal stereotypes would certainly limit the cross-population generalizability of the findings. Language such as comparing lesbians or gay men to the "general population" marginalizes lesbians and gay men.

How we conceptualize our questions and the language we use are critical in the development of a research question. We must be attentive to the choice of language used. It is important to recognize that variables such as age, race, and gender are associated with many other variables such as power, status, or income that may explain group differences. The research question in the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment reflected biases of the time, and by doing so limits the generalizability of the findings. The focus was only on males perpetrating violence on females. Yet we know that males may experience intimate partner violence and that there is intimate partner violence among same-sex intimate partners.

Foundations of Social Work Research

How do we find prior research on a question of interest? You may already know some of the relevant material from prior coursework or your independent reading, but that will not be enough. You need to find reports of previous investigations that sought to answer the same research question that you wish to answer. If there have been no prior studies of exactly the same research question on which you wish to focus, you should seek to find reports from investigations of similar research questions. For example, you may be thinking about a study of the impact of cognitive-behavioral therapy on posttraumatic stress, but you cannot find any specific studies; you might turn to available research on cognitive-behavioral therapy with persons suffering from anxiety. Once you have located reports from prior research similar to the research you wish to conduct, you may expand your search to include studies about related topics or studies that used similar methods.

Searching the Literature

Conducting a thorough search of the research literature and then critically reviewing what you have found is an essential foundation for any research project. Fortunately, most of this information can be identified online and an increasing number of published journal articles can be downloaded directly to your own computer, depending on your particular access privileges. But just because there is a lot available does not mean that you need to find it all. Keep in mind that your goal is to find relevant reports of prior research investigations. You should focus on scholarly journals that publish articles that have been reviewed by other social scientists, a process known as *peer review*.

Newspaper and magazine articles may raise important issues or summarize research findings, but they are not acceptable sources for understanding the research literature. The Internet offers much useful material, including research reports from government and well-respected research centers, sites that describe social programs, and indexes of the published research literature. You may find copies of particular rating scales, reports from research in progress, and papers that have been presented at professional conferences. Web search engines will also find academic journal

articles that you can access directly online, although usually for a fee. Rather than pay this fee, most of the published research literature will be available to you online through the website of your college or university library. However, the research information you find at various websites comes in a wide range of formats and represents a variety of sources, some of which may lead you astray, so be careful about the choices you make.

As with any part of the research process, your method for searching the literature will affect the quality of your results. Your search method should include the following steps:

Specify your research question. Your research question should be neither so broad that hundreds of articles are judged relevant nor so narrow that you miss important literature. "Is social support effective?" is probably too broad. "Does social support reduce rates of unnecessary use of assisted living residences by urban residing elderly?" may be too narrow. "Is social support effective in reducing unnecessary institutional living by the elderly?" is probably about right.

Identify appropriate bibliographic databases to search. Searching a computerized bibliographic database is by far the most efficient search strategy. Most academic libraries provide access to online databases that provide useful references for social work research such as Social Work Abstracts, PsycINFO or PsycArticles, EBSCO, and Web of Science. The search engine Google offers anyone with Internet connections access to Google Scholar. Do not limit yourself to one database as any one database may not provide a complete listing of relevant articles (Holden, Barker, Kuppens, Rosenberg, & LeBreton, 2015; McGinn, Taylor, McColgan, & McQuilkan, 2014).

Create a tentative list of keyword terms. List the question's parts and subparts and any related issues that you think might play an important role in the research: "social support," "informal support," "unnecessary institutionalization," "social support and the elderly." A good rule is to cast a net wide enough to catch most of the relevant articles with your key terms, but not so wide that it identifies many useless citations. Searching for "informal support" would be more useful than a search for "support." List the authors of relevant studies. Specify the most important journals that deal with your topic.

Narrow your search. The sheer numbers of references you find can be a problem. For example, searching for *elderly* retrieved 1,084 journal citations in Social Work Abstracts. Depending on the database you are working with and the purposes of your research, you may want to limit your search to English-language publications, to journal articles rather than conference papers or dissertations (both of which are more difficult to acquire), and to material published in recent years.

The way that words are entered into the search can lead to the retrieval of a different number of documents. A search for journal articles on *informal support* in Social Work Abstracts resulted in 147 journal citations. However, if we had searched for *informal* and *support,* we would have found 212 journal abstracts. The choice of keywords is also crucial in searching databases. If, instead of *elderly,* we had searched for *older adults,* only 561 documents would have been retrieved in Social Work Abstracts.

Use Boolean search logic. You can narrow your search by requiring that abstracts contain combinations of words or phrases. Using the Boolean connector *and* allows you to do this, while using the connector *or* allows you to find abstracts containing different words that mean the same thing. For example, searching for *elderly* and *informal support* in the same search reduced the number of documents to 37 while searching *older adult* and *informal support* retrieved 11 citations.

Use appropriate subject descriptors. Once you have an article that you consider to be appropriate, take a look at the "keywords" or "descriptors" field in the citation. You can redo your search after requiring that the articles be classified with some or all of these terms.

Check the results. Read the titles and abstracts to identify articles that appear to be relevant. In some databases, you are able to click on these article titles and generate a list of their references, as well as links to other articles that quoted the original article.

Locate the articles. Next, it is time to find the full text of articles of interest. You will probably find the full text of many articles available online, but this will be determined by the journals to which your library obtains online access.

Do not think of searching the literature as a one-time-only venture—something that you leave behind as you move on to your *real* research. You may encounter new questions or unanticipated problems as you conduct your research or as you burrow deeper into the literature. Searching the literature again to determine what others have found in response to these questions or what steps they have taken to resolve these problems can yield substantial improvements in your own research. There is so much literature on so many topics that it often is not possible to figure out in advance every subject you should search the literature for or what type of search will be most beneficial.

Another reason to make searching the literature an ongoing project is that the literature is always growing. During the course of one research study, whether it takes only one semester or several years, new findings will be published and relevant questions will be debated. Staying attuned to the literature and checking it at least when you are writing up your findings may save your study from being outdated.

Reviewing Research

If you have done your job well, you will have more than enough literature as background for your own research unless it is on a very obscure topic. At this point, your main concern is to construct a coherent framework in which to develop your research problem, drawing as many lessons as you can from previous research. You may use the literature to identify hypotheses to be reexamined, to find inadequately studied specific research questions, to explicate the disputes about your research question, to summarize the major findings of prior research, and to suggest appropriate methods of investigation.

Effective review of the prior research you find is an essential step in building the foundation for new research. You must assess carefully the quality of each research study, consider the implications of each article for your own plans, and expand your thinking about your research question to take account of new perspectives and alternative arguments. Through reviewing the literature and using it to extend and sharpen your own ideas and methods, you become a part of the social work research community.

Literature reviews appear in different formats. Some literature reviews are part of research proposals and accompany articles reporting research findings; most of the research articles that you find will include a short literature review on the specific focus of the research. Other literature reviews may be more extensive and are included in theses and dissertations. There are literature reviews that stand alone as a paper so as you search the literature, you may find that someone else has already searched the literature on your research question and discussed what they found in a special review article. For example, Lori Weeks and Kristal LeBlanc (2011) published a review of the research literature addressing older women and their experiences of intimate partner violence.

Regardless of your purpose in writing a literature review, a good literature review provides a synthesis about what is known about a particular topic and offers a critical assessment of the works reviewed. A literature review is not simply a summary of articles nor is it an annotated bibliography in which you summarize and evaluate article after article (Mongan-Rallis, 2014).

Reviewing the literature is really a two-stage process. In the first stage, you must describe and assess each article separately. The second stage of the review process is to assess the implications of the entire set of articles (and other materials) for the relevant aspects of your research question and procedures, and then to write an integrated review that highlights those implications. Although you can find literature reviews that consist simply of assessments of one published article after another—that never get beyond stage one in the review process—your understanding of the literature and the quality of your own work will be much improved if you make the effort to write an integrated review.

The first stage assessment includes both description and evaluation. You should organize your notes about each article that you read using standard sections: research question(s), theory, methods, findings, and conclusions. As you summarize the methods, you want to identify the study setting, the sample and the sampling method, measures and variables, and how data were collected. Further, you should summarize the limitations of the study; do not just rely on

the limitations described in the article as you may find other limitations. A particularly easy way to summarize your notes is to create a table using the above section headings and completing details for each article (Galvan, 2013). The questions posed in these two appendices, *Questions to Ask About a Quantitative Research Article* (Appendix A) or *Questions to Ask About a Qualitative Research Article* (Appendix C) can help guide your review.

The goal of the second stage of the literature review process is to integrate the results of your separate article reviews. The literature review should accomplish several objectives:

1. Provide background for the social issue that led to the research question.
2. Summarize prior research. Your summary of prior research must focus on the particular research question that you will address with the intent of identifying the current state of knowledge about the question. The summary should be organized around themes or particular topics. Each paragraph should address a specific issue noted in the first sentence, and the subsequent sentences should summarize findings from several studies about that particular issue.
3. Critique prior research. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the prior research. You might identify concerns such as gaps in the populations studied, issues related to sampling, measurement concerns, or the use of designs that limit conclusions.
4. Present pertinent conclusions. Conclude with the contribution your study will make given the knowledge gaps and your hypotheses if you are proposing a quantitative study or your specific research aims. Explain how the unanswered questions raised by prior research or the limitations of methods used in prior research make it important for you to conduct your own investigation (Fink, 2005).

These four objectives are evident in the literature review section of an article by Larry Bennett, Charles Stoops, Christine Call, and Heather Flett (2007; see Exhibit 2.1). The first paragraph briefly notes that domestic violence is a problem and that intervention efforts have had small effects. While the first two sentences of the second paragraph introduce possible reasons for the modest effects, it is the second that focuses on program dropout that is of particular interest; the rest of the paragraph provides information about what is known about those who failed to complete treatment. The third paragraph provides a critique of what is known, suggesting that the focus has been on only one or several programs but not on the unified system of programs in a community. The fourth paragraph describes the contribution the study will make: "*examining completion and re-arrest in a natural system of BIPS rather than a single program permits us to draw conclusions about a larger system rather than individual programs*" (p. 43.). The authors end this paragraph with the study's two specific research aims.

Implications for Evidence-Based Practice

Social work practitioners engaged in evidence-based practice must be able to find research evidence, and they must be able to critically appraise that evidence. In the past, this might have meant doing extensive literature searches or looking for reviews of the literature about the effectiveness of a treatment. Searching for individual articles is time consuming, and single studies have limited generalizability. Literature reviews of a treatment model generally describe the findings of a variety of studies about an intervention's effectiveness, but these reviews tend to be subjective, and the conclusions tend to be based on the reviewer's opinions about the evidence (Lipp, 2007).

As evidence-based practice has grown, there has been a greater emphasis on **systematic reviews** of research findings. A systematic review examines a research question using explicit methods to summarize and assess relevant research (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009). A systematic review has a

Systematic reviews Summary review about the impact of an intervention in which the analyst tries to account for differences in research design and participant characteristics, often using statistical techniques such as meta-analysis.

Exhibit 2.1 Literature Review Example

Research on the effectiveness of gender-specific batterer intervention programs (BIPs) is still in the early stages, with only four controlled experimental studies completed to date (Dunford, 2000; Feder & Dugan, 2002; Palmer, Brown, & Barrera, 1992; Taylor, Davis, & Maxwell, 2001). These studies, supported by more than 50 quasi-experimental and nonexperimental outcome studies, suggest BIPs have modest effects on recidivism. A recent meta-analysis of controlled BIP studies found that the effect size of batterer intervention programs is small but significant (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). Given the high prevalence of domestic violence in our society, even small program effects may translate into a large reduction in the number of victimizations of partners of men receiving the intervention compared to victims of men who did not receive the intervention.

Reasons BIPs may have modest effects include unidentified and untreated substance abuse and mental disorders, poverty, cultural mismatch, "stake in conformity" issues, applying person-level interventions to a society-level problem, failure to sanction noncompliance, and inclusion of generally violent men in programs that are not designed to address general antisocial behavior. Another reason for the modest effects of BIPs is that on average, 50% of the participants never complete the program, regardless of whether they are court ordered (Daly & Pelowski, 2000). Recidivism rates for men who drop out of BIPs are greater than for men who complete the program (Cadsky, Hanson, Crawford, & Lalonde, 1996), so the "dosing" effect of keeping men in programs longer may have a direct effect on outcome after controlling for other differences between dropouts and completers. Gordon and Moriarty (2003) found that the number of sessions attended was an important predictor of recidivism and that successful completion of all treatment sessions reduced the likelihood of rearrest. One study of four well-established BIPs found that program completion reduced the risk of re-offense by 46% to 66% (Gondolf, 2002). Variables that have predicted program completion in other studies include age, education, employment, prior arrest, violence in the family of origin, substance abuse, power motivation, motivation to change, mental disorder, partner residence, number of children, and lack of court sanction (Bersani & Chen, 1988; DeHart, Kennerly, Burke, & Follingstad, 1999; DeMaris, 1989; Gondolf, 1999; Grusznski & Carrillo, 1988; Hamberger & Hastings, 1989; Pirog-Good & Stets, 1986; Saunders & Parker, 1989).

Almost all of the work on BIPs has examined either a single program or else compared a few different programs within a community. To date, there are no studies of larger systems of batterer programs operating under unifying conditions. There may be advantages to examining a larger, naturally occurring batterer intervention system (BIS), because such a system might include latent community level effects and therefore better represent actual conditions within which individual programs operate. In fact, most of the research on BIPs has been conducted not on psychotherapeutic interventions with known active components but rather on service delivery systems within communities with numerous unidentified influences. By *batterer intervention system* we refer to a community based intimate partner violence reduction project with some level of coordination. In this article, we define the BIS as a natural network of BIPs within a single court jurisdiction operating under a single set of state standards and utilizing a standardized definition of program completion.

The purpose of this article is to describe program completion and re-arrest for a BIS consisting of 30 BIPs linked to the misdemeanor probation unit of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois. Examining completion and re-arrest in a natural system of BIPs rather than a single program permits us to draw conclusions about a larger system rather than individual programs. Furthermore, if that system is connected to a unit of government or policy-making body, study findings may be useful to similar units in other settings. In a county criminal justice system such as the one described in this article, findings can be applied by policy makers and program designers either implementing new BIPs or seeking to improve current programs, aiding the development of service protocols and standards. The specific questions that this evaluation addresses are (a) What predicts program completion and re-arrest? and (b) What is the effect of program completion on re-arrest?

Source: Bennett, L. W., Stoops, C., Call, C., & Flett, H. (2007). Program completion and re-arrest in a batterer intervention system. *Research on Social Work Practice, 17*, 42–54.

format typical of research studies: it begins with a research question and a rationale for the study, a methods section that describe how studies will be identified, selected, and synthesized, a results section, and a discussion section including limitations. The review tries to account for differences in design and participant characteristics, often using statistical techniques such as meta-analysis (which we describe in Chapter 7). Julia Littell (2005) suggests that such reviews provide better information about the impact of an intervention and how these impacts may vary.

Xiaoling Xiang's (2013) systematic review of interventions addressing substance abuse among homeless youth provides a good example of the degree of detail common to systematic reviews. She searched eight databases for

published research as well as ongoing trials using a combination of keywords including: drug, substance alcohol, homeless youth, homeless adolescents, street youth, runaways, intervention, treatment, programs and services. Xiang reviewed the bibliographies of acceptable articles to determine if there were others that should be assessed. Xiang (2013) used clear and specific criteria to select studies; the result was that though the key words extracted 1,692 articles, only 18 articles (15 unique studies) met the inclusion criteria.

Although systematic reviews are believed to be objective, this does not mean that there are not controversies surrounding any particular review, including differences about the inclusion or exclusion of studies and what qualifies as a rigorous study design. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Group (PRISMA Group) provides a 27-item checklist for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009) at www.openmedicine.ca/article/view/285/247.

For systematic reviews to be used by social work practitioners, they have to be both easily accessible and understandable. The Internet has eased the access to such studies, and there are now both private and government-supported programs to produce and disseminate systematic reviews. We describe several such efforts next.

Campbell Collaboration and Cochrane Community

In 1999, evaluation researchers founded the Campbell Collaboration (www.campbellcollaboration.org) to publicize and encourage systematic review of evaluation research studies. The Campbell Collaboration encourages systematic reviews of research evidence on interventions and programs in education, criminal justice, social welfare, and research methods. These reviews are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and can be used to provide evidence about different intervention techniques. For example, some of the 51 reviews (retrieved July 9, 2015) conducted about social welfare interventions address violence and include "Advocacy Interventions to Reduce or Eliminate Violence and Promote the Physical and Psychosocial Well-Being of Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Abuse" (Ramsay et al., 2009) and "Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Men Who Physically Abuse Their Female Partner" (Smedslund, Clench-Aas, Dalsbo, Steiro, & Winsvold, 2011).

The Cochrane Community is a collaboration that provides systematic reviews (among many other related services) about health care and mental health. As of July 9, 2015, there were over 5,000 reviews in the Cochrane Library, which is accessed online at www.cochranelibrary.com.

Government-Supported Resources

A variety of government agencies have begun to provide registries of effective interventions. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration supports the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP; http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/aboutnrepp.aspx). This registry features reviews of different programs, including descriptive information about the intervention, ratings of the quality of the research, and ratings about the ease of implementing an intervention to an agency setting. The interventions are rated with respect to individual outcomes so that an intervention may be effective in treating one outcome, but less so with another outcome. Search terms in the NREPP database include areas of interest (such as co-occurring disorders), outcomes (e.g., violence, homelessness), geographic location (e.g., urban, rural, tribal), age, race, gender, and settings (e.g., inpatient, outpatient, residential).

NREPP provides one source of information, but there are other government-supported registries. For example, the Guide to Community Preventive Services (www.thecommunityguide.org) is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Community Guide provides systematic reviews and interventions to promote community health on a range of topics such as mental health, sexual behavior, and violence. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention sponsors a registry of programs. The Model Program Guide (www.ojjdp.gov/mpg) provides ratings on a wide range of topics from prevention programs to reentry programs.

Theory and Social Work Research

Many of us have general notions about how things work, what people are like, and so on, but much of social work practice draws from a more formal set of ideas embodied in social theory. A **theory** is a logically interrelated set of propositions that helps us make sense of many interrelated phenomena and predict behavior or attitudes that are likely to occur when certain conditions are met. Theories help us understand how social problems emerge; they guide us in the design of interventions to help individuals, families, groups, or communities; they are used to explain relationships within organizations as well as between organizations; and they are often used to design social policy. As members of an applied profession, social work practitioners and researchers often draw from theories developed in other academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, or political science.

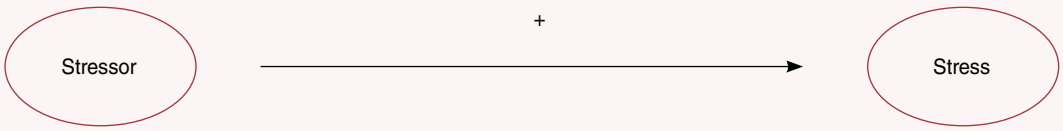
Theory A logically interrelated set of propositions about reality.

A theory consists of concepts (or constructs), which are mental images that summarize a set of similar observations, feelings, or ideas; concepts have labels designed to describe some phenomenon. A theory includes propositions or statements about the relationships among the concepts. Exhibit 2.2a illustrates a simple model of stress theory. There are two concepts, *stressors* (such as individual, family, or work-related sources of stress) and *stress* (impacts on a person's well-being). The proposition is that the more stressors in a person's life, the more stress; this is a positive relationship as indicated by the + in Exhibit 2.2a. The theory might be expanded to include a third concept, *coping resources*, which may alter the relationship between stressors and stress. Based on this small model of stress theory, the stressors in one's life can lead to poor psychological outcomes, but this depends on the coping resources available to deal with the stressful event.

Some social work researchers use theory to examine the relationship between different phenomena. Stress theory led Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) to ask whether the availability of social supports (a type of coping resource) was associated with different levels of anxiety (a type of stress) for older adults who were raising a grandchild (a type of stressor). They thought that grandparents with social supports would experience less anxiety than grandparents without social supports would (see Exhibit 2.2b). Support for such a finding would suggest practical applications for this population.

Exhibit 2.2 Stress Theory

a. Relationship of Stressor to Stress



Resources as an Intervening Variable

b. Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) application of stress theory: Relationship of social supports (resource) on anxiety (stress) for grandparents taking care of grandchildren (stressor)

There is no one theory of social work practice as different models of social work practice draw from different broader theories often rooted in other disciplines. Some social work researchers are engaged in testing and building practice theory. For example, William Bradshaw (1997) evaluated an intervention based on cognitive-behavioral theory that was designed to improve the psychological functioning of mentally ill individuals while reducing their symptoms and frequency of hospitalization. He noted that "cognitive-behavioral treatments had been applied to a wide range of populations and problems" (p. 419), but not to those suffering with schizophrenia. As described by Payne (1997), cognitive-behavioral therapy is based on the following:

- *Behavior theory,* which suggests that behavior is learned through conditioning. Behavior is something that one does in response to a stimulus, such as a person or a situation. Conditioning occurs when a behavior becomes linked to a particular stimulus.
- *Cognition theory,* which "argues that behavior is affected by perception or interpretation of the environment during the process of learning" (Payne, 1997, p. 115). Therefore, if the response to a stimulus is an inappropriate behavior, the response was due to misperceptions or misinterpretations.

Based on these two theories, Bradshaw taught clients stress management and social skills, as well as techniques to replace negative thoughts.

Some researchers are interested in organizational behavior, both how organizations operate internally and how they relate to other organizations in their environment. For example, Jennifer Mosley (2010) used *resource mobilization theory* and *resource dependency theory* to understand what distinguishes nonprofit organizations' participation in policy advocacy. Other researchers are interested in both the development and critique of social policies and will use different theories to test and explain policy outcomes. Seefeldt and Orzol (2005) used *human capital theory* (the relationship of skills and knowledge to social status) to understand differences between short-term and long-term recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Most social work research is guided by some theory, although the theory may be only partially developed in a particular study or may even be unrecognized by the researcher. When researchers are involved in conducting a research project or engrossed in writing a research report, they may easily lose sight of the larger picture. It is easy to focus on accumulating or clarifying particular findings rather than considering how the study's findings fit into a general understanding of the social world.

Up to now, we have described the importance of theory in social work research. A competing view, expressed eloquently by Bruce Thyer (2001), suggests that social work researchers should not impose theory when engaged in studies of the effectiveness of interventions and programs in social service agencies. He does not discount the importance of theory, but suggests that we can learn from evaluation research studies not driven by a theoretical perspective.

As you can see, social theories do not provide the answers to the questions we pose as topics for research. Instead, social theories suggest the areas on which we should focus and the propositions that we should consider for a test.

Alternative Research Strategies

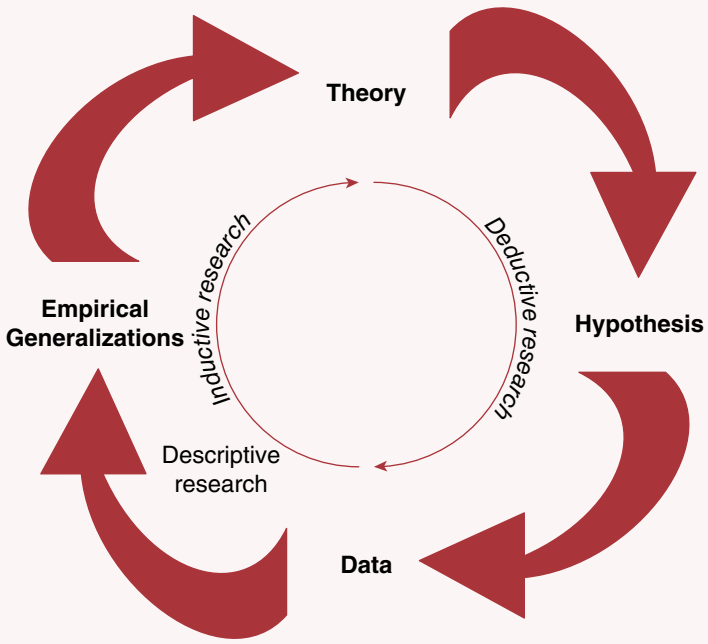
When we conduct social work research, we are attempting to connect theory with empirical data—the evidence we obtain from the social world. Researchers use two alternative strategies to make this connection:

- **Deductive research** starts with a theory and then some of its implications are tested with data; it is most often the strategy used in quantitative methods.
- **Inductive research** starts with the researcher first collecting the data and then developing a theory that explains patterns in the data; the inductive process is typically used with qualitative methods.

Deductive research The type of research in which a specific expectation is deduced from a general premise and is then tested.

A research project can use both deductive and inductive strategies. The two strategies have a two-way, mutually reinforcing relationship that can be represented by the research circle (see Exhibit 2.3). The research circle reflects the process of conducting research, moving from theory to data and back again, or from data to theory and back again. It comprises the three main research strategies: deductive research, inductive research, and descriptive research.

Exhibit 2.3 The Research Circle



Research In the News

DOES MONEY BUY HAPPINESS?

According to a study of lawyers, high pay and working at prestigious law firms was unrelated to happiness and well-being. Even partners making the highest salaries were no happier than associates. Lawyers working in public service jobs and having the lowest salaries were most likely to report being happy. And lawyers in public service jobs drank less alcohol and were just as satisfied with their lives as the high paid lawyers.

For Further Thought

1. What factors do you believe are associated with these findings?
2. Develop a theory that might explain these findings.

Source: Quenqua (2015, p. A19).