Research for Social Workers
An introduction to methods 2nd Edition
*Margaret Alston and Wendy Bowles*

1. SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH



This chapter introduces you to social research. First, some reassur-ance. Research is *not* all about numbers. If you are one of those social workers or students who have had unhappy experiences with math-ematics, do not despair! Social research is more about critical awareness, careful thinking and the ability to view situations from new perspectives than about numbers. In the twenty-first century, there are a whole range of approaches to research—some involving more mathematics than others. With the advent of computer software packages, it is more important to understand the thinking or logic behind the mathematics, and the theoretical perspectives behind the thinking, than to be able to calculate the numbers themselves.

In this chapter we examine some of the different forms of research and the power of the underlying beliefs which shape them. Quanti-tative, qualitative, emancipatory, feminist and postmodern influences on research methods are discussed. Each of these offers a range of possibilities for creative and exciting research for social workers. All these approaches can be used by social work researchers and are important for you to understand. As you will see, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, much research today involves a mixture of methods—that is, researchers use a ‘multimethod’ approach, selecting aspects of different approaches that best suit their purposes. As this is a text for beginning researchers, we present the approaches separately so that you can see how they have evolved, and so that we can introduce some of the debates that surround them.

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In this chapter we also consider some of the important political and ethical issues that surround research, before moving on in later chapters to the ‘how to’ of different research approaches. First of all we discuss what social research is and why, as social workers, we should study it.

**W**HY STUDY RESEARCH?

Whether they realise it or not, most social workers are constantly doing research or research-like activities. Consider the following:

A social worker wonders which counselling methods used by different workers in her team are most helpful to the young offenders they see on a regular basis.

A community worker, in a new job at a council, has a brief to find out what the local community thinks of a planned development to build an industrial complex in some bushland containing a disused quarry.

A worker in a church-based agency holds a regular group for homeless youth and suspects that many group members are facing similar issues and problems in their lives.

A social welfare worker wants to know what effects the new respite care service is having for families who are under stress. A worker in the disability field, who has been asked to establish a new service for young adults, wonders what life is like from the perspective of the young people and what kind of services, if any, they would like his agency to provide.

All these situations require research skills if social workers are to address the questions and issues they face. The bottom line is: if you are to make informed decisions or carefully thought through actions/interventions, you need research skills.

More specifically, consider the following reasons for studying research.

**Becoming an informed research consumer**

Social workers are often confronted with government or interdepart-mental reports in which research and statistics are quoted. If this is a familiar situation for you, you are probably uncomfortably aware that you may have taken such reports at face value, and, because of a lack of research understanding, you may not have the ability to critique such reports. You should heed Royse’s (1991, p. 5) suggestion that:

as an informed consumer, you ought to be able to know if too few subjects were interviewed, if the methodology was flawed, or if the

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author generalised well beyond his or her findings. Research studies can be biased or flawed for a lot of different reasons, and you might not be able to detect these reasons without a basic understanding of research methodology.

All social research has a political imperative. Some reports may take liberties in the way research is presented in order to achieve or to bolster a certain perspective. Some departments, keen to downsize, for example, may disregard or under-report the success of certain programs. Some statistics may be used inappropriately or out of context to enhance an unsupported position. Likewise, some research reports might enhance positive findings in order to ensure continued funding. It is naive to think otherwise in an economic climate where large cuts have been made to welfare spending.

Consider also that when outside consultants are used by an agency or department to assess the organisation’s functions, you should be in a position to critically analyse their work and examine whether or not they have given you a fair appraisal. It is imperative that you become an informed practitioner capable of dissecting the information on which decisions are being made about policies which affect your department or your programs.

**Finding out about your practice**

A second and equally important reason why you should have com-petent research skills is to allow you to justify your practice interventions in an informed way. It is not enough to rely on your intuition—intuition is susceptible to bias and may reflect your own values rather than client benefits. In these days of increasing account-ability to funding bodies and to the people for whom the services are established, workers must be able to find out what the people they are working with want and need, how their interventions are affecting people’s lives, and how their programs and approaches can be improved. More and more around the world social workers are being expected to work in an evidence-based culture; that is, to know if what they are doing is working or not.

There are a number of ways practice effectiveness may be assessed. For instance, as a practitioner, you may be called on to examine the effect of certain interventions on a group of clients. You might also be called on to justify your agency’s effectiveness by providing an evaluation of the use of its services and the effects of the services on the client group.

Again, you might be called on to show you are meeting the needs of a particular target group (needs analysis). Often practitioners keen to continue a new program are expected to evaluate the program in order that its effectiveness can be demonstrated—that it is meeting its objectives, that it is developing as intended and producing desired outcomes (program evaluation). The future development of the

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program may depend on well-constructed evaluation research. As well, maintaining and indeed increasing your funding level may depend on your analysis of research conducted to justify a service (cost–benefit analysis).

It is also vital that you have the confidence and competence to act as a contributing partner in research projects. There are often occasions when your agency or department will conduct or contribute to a research project. Having an understanding of research methods will allow you to ensure that a social work perspective is part of the project.

**Participating in the policy process**

We also need to develop our research tradition so that we are better able to assess government social policies and to formulate such policies. It is our role as a profession to take a lead in the formulation of policy that affects the most vulnerable members of our community and to attack or support government policies. In the past social workers have not been known for applying pressure effectively—at any level of government—to change or modify policies. As an exam-ple, there has been little noise from the helping professions condemning the cuts in government welfare services and this is not aided by the lack of data supporting retention of services.

With improved research skills, you will be on firmer ground in joining in the policy process—in commenting on current policies or evaluations of policy and in developing a case for new or different policies.

**Undertaking postgraduate education**

Studying research at undergraduate level will facilitate your entry into Masters and doctorate programs. This reason should not be discounted, as it is our experience that students may be reluctant to pursue postgraduate study because of their lack of knowledge about research and their fear of attempting a major research project. Yet we need such students to build a strong theoretical and research base in order to upgrade the standing of our discipline. Of course you must also be aware that studying research at undergraduate level is a requirement of professional social work associations around the world and so is a basic requirement for those of you wishing to attain a social work degree.

**Developing social work knowledge and theory**

A very important reason for studying research is to aid in the development of social work knowledge and theory. Having studied, or being now involved in studying social work, you would be aware that the development of social work theories rests on the shoulders

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of practitioners who are able to test and evaluate their usefulness. We need these developments to come from social workers themselves and not from other disciplinary areas. For all these reasons, and more, you will benefit from the study of research methods.

**Practising in an ethically responsible manner**

Social work codes of ethics around the world support ethical research practice. For example, the ethical codes of the British, American and Australian social work associations all contain detailed sections on how to undertake ethical research. We discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.

**W**HAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH?

From the discussion above, it can be seen that many different types of research are used in the welfare field. Which approaches you choose depend on the purpose of the research, your background and beliefs, the agenda of the organisation funding the research and, increasingly, the perspectives of the people and/or programs being researched.

**Examples of the variety of social research used in the welfare field**

Needs analysis

Action research

Outcome evaluation

Cost–benefit analysis

Secondary analysis

Content analysis

Client satisfaction surveys

Qualitative in-depth interviewing

Nearly all forms of research involve the search for patterns or themes—ways of simplifying a mass of information into meaningful stories or relationships. Good research helps us to make links, gain insight into apparent contradictions, explore new territory and raise difficult questions. In the process of searching for patterns or themes, all types of research involve some form of measurement. In chapters 2 and 3 we will explore the different types of measurement used in the process of translating broad research issues into researchable questions.

In the welfare field nearly all types of research are undertaken in order to make a decision or to take some action. If we go to the

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trouble and expense of undertaking a research project, it would be most disappointing if the finished report sat on a shelf gathering dust. It is often said that research is a means of putting off tough or expensive decisions. Instead of being the end of the process, your report should be the first step in changing a policy, deciding on an intervention strategy or setting up a new service.

Taking these considerations into account then, the definition of research (below) describes the way the term ‘social research’ is under-stood throughout this book. The research literature contains as many definitions of research as there are forms; this definition captures the broad elements that are generally agreed upon as being shared by most research that is undertaken in the social welfare field.

**Definition of social research**

Social research is the systematic observation and/or collection of information to find or impose a pattern, to make a decision or take some action.

It is difficult to define what is unique about research in social work. However, McDermott (1996) makes a very good beginning when she suggests that social work research:

Would be research that arises from a particular theorisation of the acting subject within his/her social, political and economic context Would be research that privileges the research process as an intervention leading to the possibility of constructive change Would be research that enables the participation of the researched—the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed and those who interact with them (p. 6)

In any definition of social work research we must ensure that we incorporate the tenets of the Social Work Code of Ethics that guide all aspects of our practice. The power of research as a tool for social change is fundamental to our understanding of the place of research in social work. Just as the goals of social work involve not just understanding the world, but actively intervening to change things in some way, so, too, does social work research involve action, decisions and change.