

CHAPTER 1

Science, Society, and Social Work Research

Reasoning About the Social World

Overgeneralization
Selective or Inaccurate Observation
Illogical Reasoning
Resistance to Change
Adherence to Authority

The Scientific Approach Is Different

Why Research Is Important for Social Work

Evidence-Based Practice and Social Work Research

Social Work Research in Practice

Descriptive Research: Who Are the Homeless?
Exploratory Research: What Is It Like to Live in a Homeless Shelter?
Explanatory Research: Why Do People Become Homeless?
Evaluation Research: What Services Help the Homeless?

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

Strengths and Limitations of Social Work Research

The Validity of Research Findings

Measurement Validity
Generalizability
Causal Validity

Social Work Research in a Diverse Society

Conclusion

Key Terms

Highlights

Discussion Questions

Critiquing Research

Making Research Ethical

Developing a Research Proposal

Web Exercises

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. We describe the important role research plays in evidence-based practice. We explain the motivations for research using homelessness as an example. 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 a diverse society.

REASONING ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORLD

The story of just one homeless person raises many questions. How did Burt become homeless? Did Burt have any family? Was Burt working? But we can also ask broader questions about Burt and homelessness: Was Burt typical of the homeless population? What is it like to be homeless? Why do people become homeless? How do homeless individuals adjust to housing? What programs are effective in helping homeless people? Are social policies effective in reducing the number of homeless people?

We cannot avoid asking questions about the social world, which is a complex place. We all try to make sense of the social world and our position in it. In fact, the more that 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 provide sufficient affordable and adequate housing, while a third person may see the same individual as a lazy bum. People’s different orientations will result in different answers to the questions prompted by the same individual or event.

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. These errors include overgeneralization, selective and inaccurate observation, illogical reasoning, resistance to change, and adherence to authority.

You do not have to be a researcher 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 minister, teacher, or other adviser) to not stereotype people, to avoid jumping to conclusions, and to look at the big picture. These are the same errors that the methods of social science are designed to help us avoid.

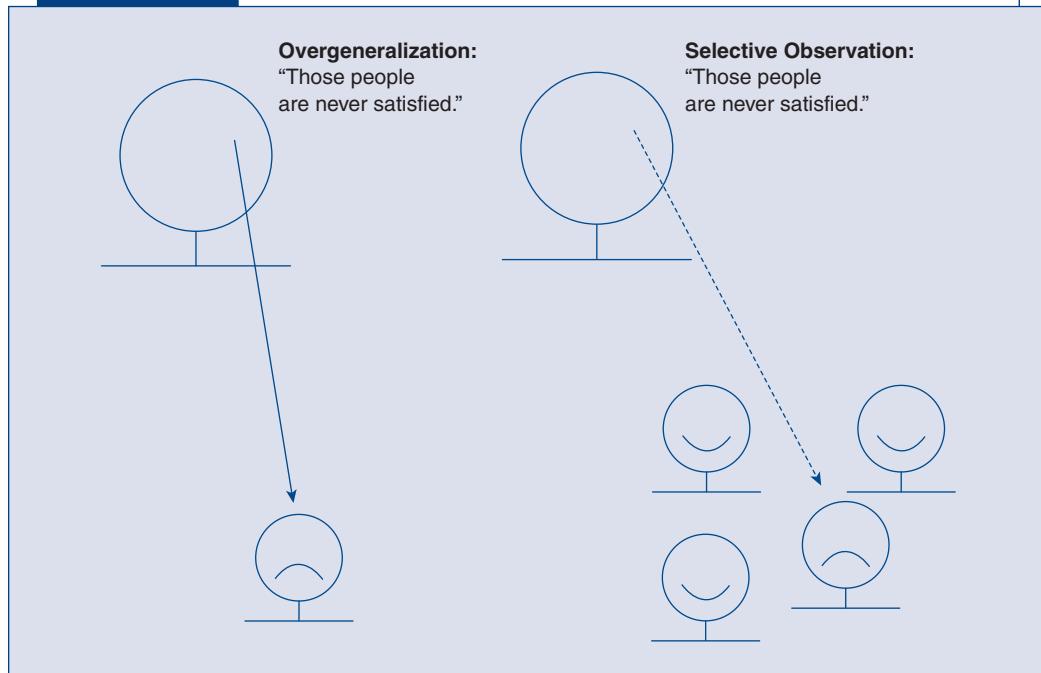
Overgeneralization

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. If we had taken facts about Burt, such as his alcohol abuse, and concluded that these problems are typical of the homeless, we have committed the error of overgeneralization.

Selective or Inaccurate Observation

We also 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 like Debbie Allen, who ran away from a home she shared with an alcoholic father and psychotic mother; Charlotte Gentile, a teacher with a bachelor's degree living with two daughters in a shelter after losing her job; and Faith Brinton, who walked out of her rented home with her two daughters to escape an alcoholic and physically abusive husband and ended up in a shelter after her husband stopped paying child support? If we acknowledge only the instances that confirm our predispositions, we are victims of our own selective observation. Exhibit 1.1 depicts the difference between selective observation and overgeneralization.

Our observations can also 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 seven actually 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.

EXHIBIT 1.1**The Difference Between Overgeneralization and Selective Observation**

Source: Schutt (2005).

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 1.2, 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.

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 the difficulty in finding jobs for those who have 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.”

EXHIBIT 1.2 An Optical Illusion

Source: Schutt (2005).

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change, the reluctance to change our ideas in light of new information, is a common problem. Our own egos can get in the way of observable reality. 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, and it is often difficult to admit that we were wrong once we have staked out a position on an issue. We also know that some degree of devotion to tradition is necessary for the predictable functioning of society, but too much devotion to tradition can stifle adaptation to changing circumstances.

Adherence to Authority

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. Too often we do not critically evaluate the ideas of those in positions of authority, whether they are parents, professors, or supervisors, or even the published word. We once had a student in a social welfare history and policy 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. Students are right to question the “authority” of the professor if there is indeed no evidence to support the professor’s assertions. One of the failings of social work professional literature is that there are many claims about practice effectiveness, but there is no evidence to support the claims (Gambrill, 2001).

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH IS DIFFERENT

The **social science** approach to answering questions about the social world is designed to greatly reduce these potential sources of error in everyday reasoning. **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. Social scientists develop, refine, apply, and report their understanding of the social world more systematically 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 who are representative of the individuals or groups about whom we wish to generalize.
- Social science methods can reduce the risk of selective, inaccurate, or incomplete observation by requiring that we measure and sample phenomena systematically.
- To avoid illogical reasoning, social work researchers use explicit criteria to identify causes and to determine whether these criteria are met in a particular instance.
- Scientific methods lessen the tendency to develop answers about the social world from ego-based commitments, excessive devotion to tradition, or unquestioning respect for authority because they require that we base our beliefs on evidence that can be examined and critiqued by others.

WHY RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT FOR SOCIAL WORK

The methods of social science research are invaluable tools for social work practitioners at any level of practice. The nature of our social world is the starting point for our profession, because much of what we do is in response to social, political, and economic conditions. Social policies and programs and interventions provided by human service agencies are based on assumptions about the cause of a social condition (Martin & Kettner, 1996). Is homelessness due to individual behavior? Individual pathology? Local housing-market conditions? Insufficient wages? The responses to these questions shape social policy about homelessness and the types of programs offered by human service providers.

Our profession works with people from diverse backgrounds and promotes the social and economic participation of groups who lack access to full participation. Through research we can challenge perceptions and popular sentiment of those who are in need. Burt reflects common stereotypes about the homeless, namely that they are male and that 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 science research provides methods to address these questions. 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.

Evidence-Based Practice and Social Work Research

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has emerged in the last 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 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, that is, authority on the effectiveness of social work practice.

EBP requires that the choice of an intervention should be based on the best current research evidence to achieve a particular outcome, client values, client circumstances, and clinical expertise (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 utilize 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 and focus groups), and practitioner-collected information (e.g., single-subject design) 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). Such preferences may influence 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 within 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 while other clients confront 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). A skilled social worker knows how to find the relevant research literature, evaluate its accuracy, and determine its usefulness to a particular client or client system (Gambrill, 2001). One key skill is having the knowledge to weigh and assess research findings to evaluate the evidence. A skilled social worker will have the communication skills needed to solicit client values and preferences and, in turn, communicate to clients their options. A social worker should be able to provide different interventions (or refer to appropriate providers) given a client's particular circumstances.

Another component of evidence-based practice 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.

Although this may sound daunting, these themes are consistent with ethical obligations expected of social work practitioners as described in the National Association of Social Workers (1999) *Code of Ethics*: Enabling clients to make informed decisions is consistent with obtaining informed consent (1.03[a]). Social workers should keep up-to-date with relevant knowledge (4.01[b]), utilize interventions with an empirical basis (4.01[c]), and include evaluation and research evidence as part of professional practice (5.02[c]).

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 determine the usefulness of the findings 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. In each chapter, you will read about the implications of the specific topic for EBP.

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Although social work researchers study different phenomena, social conditions, effects of different programs, and intervention methods, the purpose of these studies

can be classified into four categories: description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation.

Descriptive Research: Who Are the Homeless?

Defining and describing social conditions 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 on homelessness have been these: Who is homeless? What are the needs of homeless people? How many people are homeless?

In 1995, Martha Burt and her colleagues at the Urban Institute (a research and policy institute located in Washington, DC), in collaboration with 12 federal agencies, designed and implemented the *1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients* to address these questions (Burt et al., 1999). The study was designed to provide a nationally representative sample of programs assisting homeless persons as well as a representative sample of their homeless clients. The sample included the 28 largest metropolitan statistical areas across the country, 24 randomly drawn smaller metropolitan statistical areas, and 24 randomly selected rural Community Action Agency catchment areas. After choosing the locations, all agencies serving homeless people were identified and contacted. To interview clients, agencies were randomly selected and within each of the agencies, clients using the homeless program were randomly selected. Because the researchers were interested in providers and clients, the researchers had to be very careful in defining *homeless assistance program* and *homeless status*.

The design of the survey reinforces the importance of social scientific methods. Clear definitions were necessary, and the selection method had to ensure that the findings would be generalizable beyond the selected settings. Yet the characterizations of the homeless clients were limited to those people who were using assistance programs; otherwise, in places where there were fewer or virtually no programs for the homeless, many people might be missed. The lack of programs in rural areas may have biased the descriptions of the homeless in rural areas; agency policies about who is served may also have biased these descriptions (Burt et al., 1999).

This study revealed the diversity among the homeless population. About 34% of the homeless were members of homeless families, about 70% were men, 53% were non-White, and 38% had less than a high school diploma. In addition, fewer than 10% were currently married and 23% were veterans. Health problems were common, yet nearly one-quarter reported that, though they needed medical attention, they could not get it. Nearly two-thirds of the clients had an alcohol, drug, or mental health problem in the month previous to the interview.

Exploratory Research: What Is It Like to Live in a Homeless Shelter?

Exploratory research seeks to learn how people get along in the setting in 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 expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information.

Among researchers interested in homelessness, an early goal was to learn what it was like to be homeless and how homeless people made sense of their situation. Alice Johnson (1999) wanted to learn about the events that led women with children to seek emergency shelter and what it was like for them to live in an emergency shelter. To answer these questions, Johnson conducted an exploratory study using the personal narratives of women who were ex-residents of an emergency shelter in Connecticut. She interviewed 25 women with children who, when they came to the shelter, were not recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The interviews typically took place in the women’s current residences and lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

Johnson (1999) found that reactions to living in the emergency shelter changed over time. Initially, the women reported feeling depressed or lonely: “I was very depressed. Especially when you have no family near you, no friends, or nobody. It’s a very depressing feeling. I was depressed in the first week. I did a lot of crying. I was in my room a lot” (p. 50).

After this initial reaction to the shelter, the women developed new perceptions about their problems (Johnson, 1999). The women reported that they started to see their own lives as being better in comparison with the lives of other women in the shelter. Many reported learning that they had to be strong to take responsibility for providing for their children.

I’m going to be honest. What helped me was my son. I would look on my son and I’d say, “I have to live for him.” That’s what picked me up. That’s what told me to get going. For him. Find anything—whatever I can get. Go for it because of him. (p. 52)

Other women found that the shelter provided respite from their problems and an opportunity to come to grips with their problems. Finally, the women saw this respite as an opportunity to begin planning for their future.

Johnson found that the women ultimately did not see the shelter as a negative experience; rather, living in a shelter was part of the solution to the crises these women faced in their lives. Living in the shelter provided the women with the time and opportunity to deal with their problems and to restore stability to their family life. The shelter was a place where they received emotional support and tangible help, learned how to navigate social services, and saved money.

Explanatory Research: Why Do People Become Homeless?

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. In other words, explanatory research is used to understand the causes of a social condition such as homelessness.

Peter Rossi's (1989) work on homelessness was designed to understand why people become homeless. His comparison of homeless people with other extremely poor Chicagoans allowed him to address this explanatory research question. Rossi surveyed a sample of homeless people in shelters and those individuals he and his assistants could find living on the streets. The street sample was something of a challenge. Rossi consulted with local experts to identify which of Chicago's 19,400 blocks were the most likely resting places of homeless people at night. Then he drew samples of blocks from each of the three resulting categories: blocks with a high, medium, and low probability of having homeless people at night. Finally, Rossi's interviewers visited these blocks on several nights between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. and briefly interviewed people who seemed to be homeless.

After extensive analysis of the data, Rossi (1989) developed a straightforward explanation of homelessness: Homeless people are extremely poor, and all extremely poor people are vulnerable to being displaced because of the high cost of housing in urban areas. Those who are most vulnerable to losing their homes are individuals with problems of substance abuse or mental illness, which leave them unable to contribute to their own support. Extremely poor individuals who have these characteristics and are priced out of cheap lodging by urban renewal and rising housing prices often end up living with relatives or friends. However, the financial and emotional burdens created by this arrangement eventually strain social ties to the breaking point.

Evaluation Research: What Services Help the Homeless?

Evaluation research (program evaluation or practice evaluation) seeks to determine the effects of social policies and the impact of programs. Evaluation research uses the tools of research to do 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 or intervention; monitoring the progress of clients; or monitoring the performance of staff. These same tools provide a standard by which we can also evaluate the evaluation.

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 2, and specifically to institutional review processes to protect human subjects as required. 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 (Snider, 1999). The beneficiaries of the information are the program providers or the clients receiving the services.

The problem of homelessness spawned many 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 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 were given immediate access to housing and were offered an array of services, and in which abstinence was not a prerequisite, or the *treatment-first model*, in which housing was 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 for housing.

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

In general, research methods can be divided into two different domains called quantitative research methods and qualitative research methods. Did you notice the difference between the types of data the studies used? The primary data collected by Martha Burt et al. (1999) were counts about the homeless population: how many had families, their gender, their race, and other characteristics. Because these data were numerical, we can say this study used **quantitative methods**. Rossi's (1989) survey and Padgett et al.'s (2006) study also used quantitative methods, and they reported their

findings as percentages and other statistics that summarized homelessness. In contrast, Johnson (1999) used personal narratives—original text—to understand life in a homeless shelter; because she used actual text, and not counts or other quantities, we say that Johnson used **qualitative methods**.

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. The goals of quantitative and qualitative

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. Data that are treated as qualitative are mostly written or spoken words or observations that do not have a direct numerical interpretation.

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 (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). An authentic understanding is one that reflects *fairly* the various perspectives of participants in that setting.

As important as it is, we do not want to place too much emphasis on the distinction between quantitative and qualitative orientations or methods. Social work researchers often combine these methods to enhance their research. For example, Hicks-Coolick, Burnside-Eaton, and Peters (2003) used an interview guide with directors of six homeless shelters to understand the kinds of services needed by homeless children and then sent a mail survey to the directors of 600 shelters in order to augment their qualitative data. The use of both methods, called mixed-methods, provided a clearer understanding of the reality of service delivery and needs.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

These are only four 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. Notice how each of the four studies was designed to reduce the errors common in everyday reasoning:

- The clear definition of the population of interest in each study and the selection of a broad, representative sample of that population in two studies (Burt’s and Rossi’s) increased the researchers’ ability to draw conclusions without overgeneralizing the findings to groups to which they did not apply.
- The use of surveys in which each respondent was asked the same set of questions reduced the risk of selective or inaccurate observation.
- 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.
- Resistance to change was reduced by utilizing a research design that controls for other explanations.

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 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. For example, 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.

But 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.

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 methods has many benefits. This knowledge 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. Also, 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.

THE VALIDITY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

A scientist seeks to develop an accurate understanding of empirical reality by conducting research studies that lead to valid knowledge about the world. We have reached the goal of **validity** when our statements or conclusions about empirical reality are correct. The purpose of social work research is not to come up with conclusions that people will like, or to find answers that make our agencies look better or that suit our own personal preferences. Rather, social work research is about (a) conducting research that leads to valid interpretations of the social world; (b) reaching useful conclusions about the impact of social policy; and (c) formulating valid conclusions about the effects of our practice with clients. Therefore, we are concerned with three aspects of validity: measurement validity, generalizability, and causal validity. We learn that invalid measures, invalid generalizations, or invalid causal inferences result in inaccurate conclusions.

Measurement Validity

Measurement validity is our first concern in establishing the validity of research results, because if we have not measured what we think we measured, we really do not know what we are talking about. For example, some researchers have found a high level of serious and persistent mental illness among homeless people based on interviews with samples of homeless people at one point in time. Mental illness has typically been measured by individuals' responses to a series of questions that ask whether they are feeling depressed, anxious, paranoid, and so on. Homeless people more commonly say yes to these questions than do other people, even other extremely poor people who are not homeless.

But for these responses to be considered indicators of mental illness, the responses must indicate relatively enduring states of mind. Critics of these studies note that the living conditions of homeless people are likely to make them feel depressed, anxious, and even paranoid. Feeling depressed may be a normal reaction to homelessness, not an indication of mental illness. Thus, the argument goes, typical survey questions may not provide valid measures of mental illness among the homeless.

Suffice it to say at this point that we must be careful in designing our measures and in evaluating how well they have performed. We must be careful to ensure that the measures are appropriate and comparable for the groups with whom they are used.

Generalizability

The **generalizability** of a study is the extent to which it can be used to inform us about people, places, or events that were not studied. We rarely have the resources to study the entire population that is of interest, so we have to select cases to study. We can never be sure that our propositions will hold under all conditions, so we should be cautious in generalizing to populations that we did not actually sample.

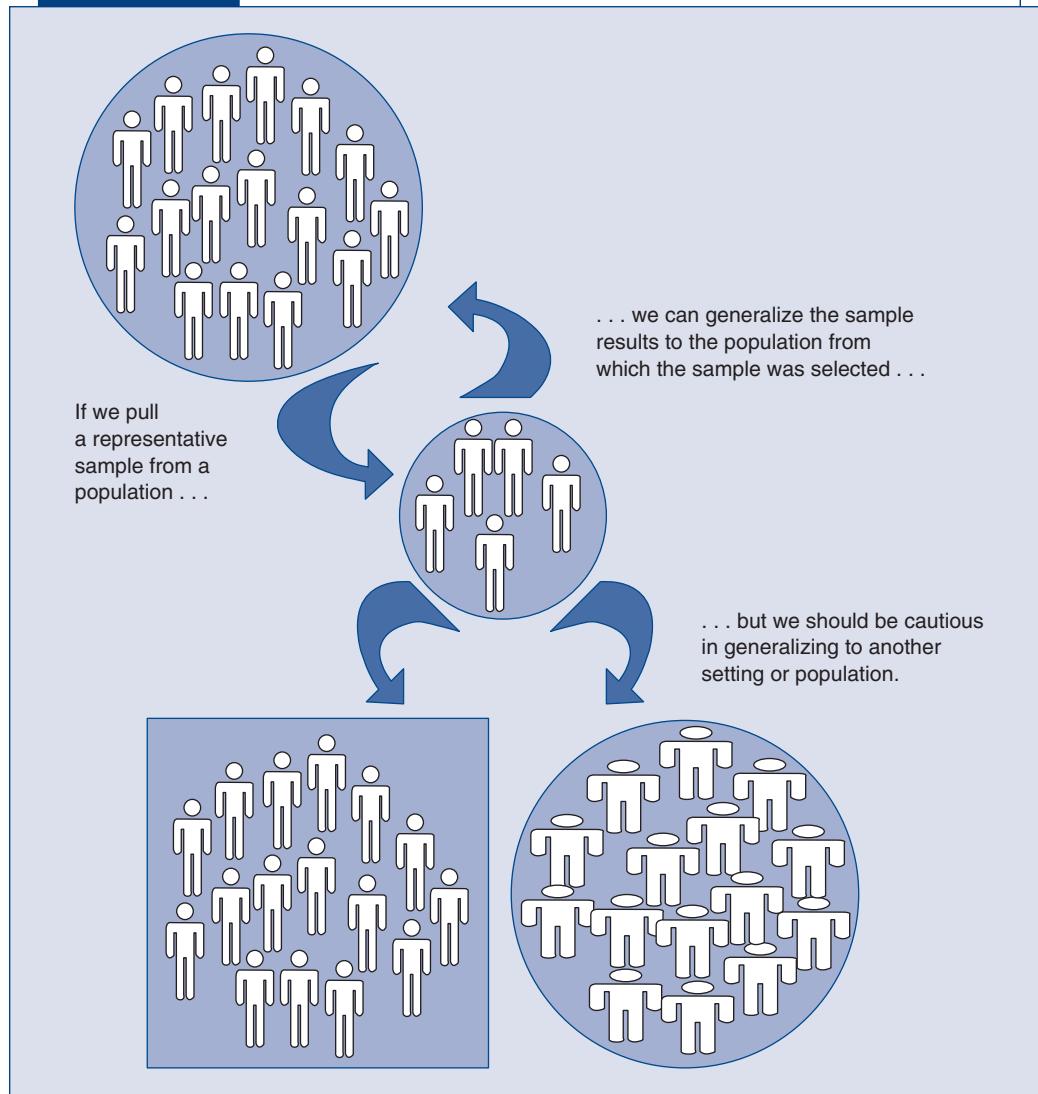
Although most American cities have many shelters for homeless people and some homeless people sleep on the streets to avoid shelters, many studies of “the homeless” are based on surveys of individuals found in just one shelter. When these studies are reported, the authors state that their results are based on homeless people in one shelter, but then they go on to talk about “the homeless this” and “the homeless that,” as if their study results represented all homeless people in the city or even in the nation. If every homeless person was like every other one, generalizations based on observations of one homeless person would be valid. But, of course, that is not the case. In fact, homeless people who avoid shelters tend to be different from those who use shelters, and different types of shelters may attract different types of homeless people. We are on solid ground if we question the generalizability of statements about homeless people based on the results of a survey in just one shelter.

Generalizability has two aspects. **Sample generalizability** refers to the ability to take findings obtained from a sample, or subset, of a larger population and apply them to that population. This is the most common meaning of generalizability. A community organizer

may study a sample of residents living in a particular neighborhood in order to assess their attitudes toward opening a homeless shelter in their neighborhood and then generalize the findings to all the residents of the neighborhood. The value of the findings is enhanced if what the community organizer learns is representative of all the residents and not just the residents who were surveyed.

Cross-population generalizability refers to the ability to generalize from findings about one group or population or setting to other groups or populations or settings (see Exhibit 1.3).

EXHIBIT 1.3 Sample and Cross-Population Generalizability



Source: Schutt (2005).

Cross-population generalizability occurs to the extent that the results of a study hold true for multiple populations; these populations may not all have been sampled or they may be represented as subgroups within the sample studied. Consider the debate over whether social support reduces psychological distress among homeless people as it does among housed people (Schutt, Meschede, & Rierdan, 1994). A study based on a sample of only homeless people

could not in itself resolve this debate. But in a heterogeneous sample of both homeless and housed people, the effect of social support on distress among both groups could be tested.

Or consider this when you read about an intervention to help homeless individuals obtain and maintain a permanent residence. It is likely that such a study is done in a particular agency, serving homeless individuals with particular characteristics, living in a particular community. Ideally, you would like to be able to implement that intervention and achieve the same success in your agency, working with your particular clients, in your particular community. You would have greater confidence in implementing the intervention if there is evidence of cross-population generalizability.

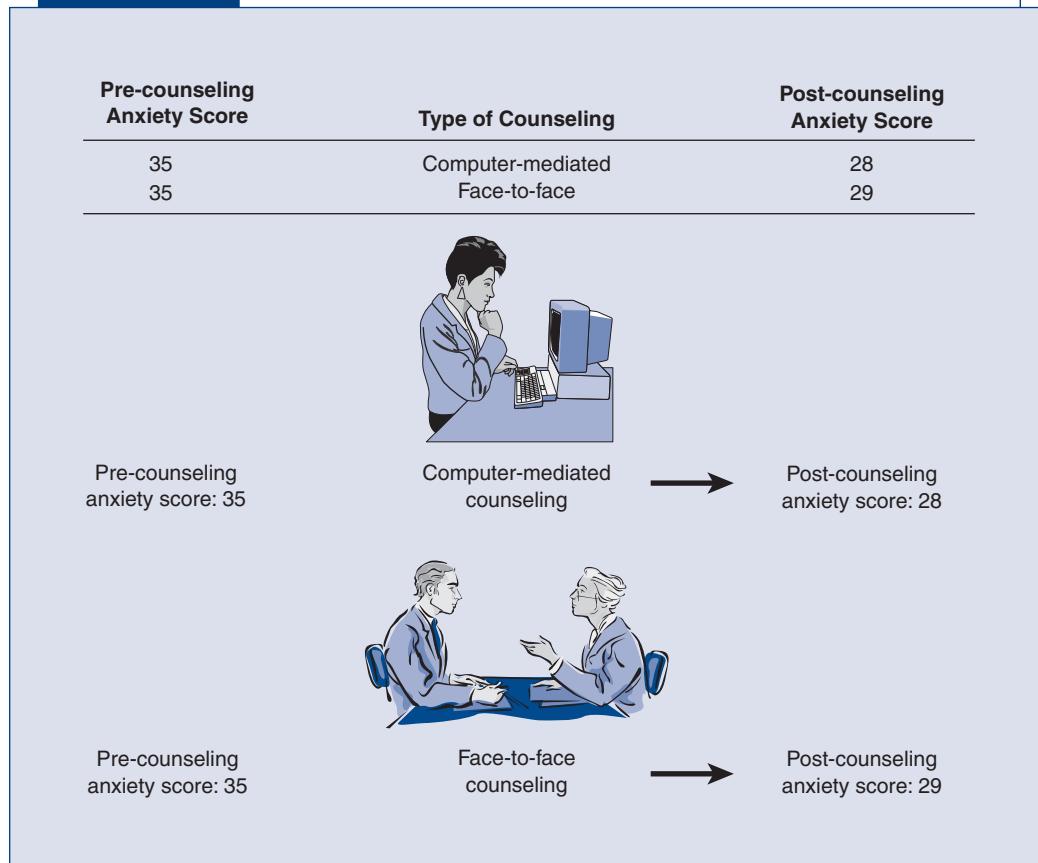
Sample generalizability Exists when a conclusion based on a sample, or subset, of a larger population holds true for that population.

Cross-population generalizability Exists when findings about one group or population or setting hold true for other groups or populations or settings (see Exhibit 1.3). Also called *external validity*.

Causal Validity

Causal validity refers to the truthfulness of an assertion that A causes B. Most research seeks to determine what causes what, so social scientists frequently must be concerned with causal validity. For example, Gary Cohen and Barbara Kerr (1998) asked whether computer-mediated counseling could be as effective as face-to-face counseling for mental health problems. They could have compared people who had experienced one of these types of treatment, but it is quite likely that individuals who sought out a live person for counseling would differ in important ways from those who were attracted to an opportunity for the less personal computer-mediated counseling. So, instead, they designed an experiment in which individuals seeking counseling were assigned randomly to either computer-mediated or face-to-face counseling. This procedure made it unlikely that people who were less sociable, more educated, and younger were disproportionately in the computer-mediated condition. The differences in counseling outcomes were more likely to be due to the differences in the types of counseling, rather than to differences in the types of people being counseled. Students in both groups benefited to the same degree, so researchers concluded that computer-mediated counseling was as effective in reducing anxiety as face-to-face counseling. (See Exhibit 1.4).

But causal conclusions can be mistaken because of some factor that was not recognized during planning for the study, even in randomized experiments. If the computer-mediated counseling sessions were conducted in a modern building with all the latest amenities, while face-to-face counseling was delivered in a run-down building, this might have led to different outcomes for reasons quite apart from the type of counseling.

EXHIBIT 1.4 Partial Evidence of Causality

Source: Engel & Schutt (2005).

Establishing causal validity can be quite difficult. You will learn in subsequent chapters how experimental designs and statistics can help us evaluate causal propositions, but the solutions are neither easy nor perfect: We always have to consider critically the validity of causal statements that we hear or read.

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

Social work research is being 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, distinct cultural, social, and historical experiences shape and influence group experiences. Just as social work practitioners are expected to engage in culturally competent practice, social work researchers must recognize that cultural norms influence the research process, whether in terms of the willingness to participate in research activities, the meaning ascribed to abstract terms and concepts, 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-SUPERPPF 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; Norton & Manson, 1996). 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, the poor, 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; in other words, is there measurement validity? Measurement bias can result in misidentifying the prevalence of a condition and result in group differences that may not actually exist.

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, Pasick et al. (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.

Data must be analyzed carefully. Often ethnic and racial minorities are compared with the majority population; but in doing so, we may be treating these 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 et al. (2003) noted that American Indian and Alaska Native communities had experienced research efforts that resulted in negative stereotypes and publicity for their communities; confidentiality, they suggested, needs to extend beyond the individual respondent 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

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.

As you read through the studies in this book and as you critically evaluate other research articles, you should continue to ask: How valid are the conclusions? Each research technique must be evaluated in terms of its ability to help us with measurement validity, generalizability, and causal validity. The ensuing chapters are designed to help you learn to assess the validity of research conclusions, whether from your own research or from the research efforts of others.

KEY TERMS

Adherence to authority	Measurement validity
Causal validity	Overgeneralization
Cross-population generalizability	Qualitative methods
Descriptive research	Quantitative methods
Evaluation research	Resistance to change
Evidence-based practice	Sample generalizability
Explanatory research	Science
Exploratory research	Selective observation
Generalizability	Social science
Illogical reasoning	Validity
Inaccurate observation	

HIGHLIGHTS

- Five common errors in reasoning are overgeneralization, selective or inaccurate observation, illogical reasoning, resistance to change, and adherence to authority.
- 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.
- 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 evidence base of interventions, programs, and policies designed to ameliorate the social condition.
- Evidence-based practice suggests that practice decisions should integrate the best current research evidence, client values, client circumstances, and clinical expertise.
- Social work research can be descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative.
- Quantitative methods record variation in social life in terms of categories that vary in amount while qualitative methods are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in predetermined categories.
- The three components of validity are measurement validity, generalizability (both from the sample to the population from which it was selected and from the sample to other populations), and causal validity.
- An important consideration for research practice is social diversity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Select a social issue that is of interest to you. Discuss your beliefs about the causes of the social issue. 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. Develop four research questions related to a topic or issue, one for each of the four types of research—descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and evaluation.
3. 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?

CRITIQUING RESEARCH

1. 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.

MAKING RESEARCH ETHICAL

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 2, 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 known as "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 Padgett et al. (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?

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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?

2. Develop four questions that you might investigate about the topic you just selected. Each question should reflect a different research motive: descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, and evaluation. Be specific.

3. Which question most interests you? Would you prefer to attempt to answer that question with quantitative or qualitative methods? Why?

To assist you in completing the Web exercises below and to gain a better understanding of the chapter's contents, please access the study site at <http://www.sagepub.com/fswrstudy> where you will find the Web exercises reproduced with suggested links, along with self-quizzes, e-flash cards, interactive exercises, journal articles, and other valuable resources.

WEB EXERCISES

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