

Heather D’Cruz and Martyn Jones

# Social Work Research in Practice

Ethical and Political Contexts

2nd Edition



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

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Thousand Oaks, California 91320

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Cover design: Lisa Harper  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in India at Replika Press Pvt Ltd

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First edition published 2004. Reprinted 2007, 2009, 2010  
and 2012.

This edition first published 2014.

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2012956001**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-0078-0  
ISBN 978-1-4462-0079-7 (pbk)

# 1

## Research, Social Work and Professional Practice

### Introduction

For the new edition of this book, we have slightly changed the book's title to *Social Work Research in Practice: Ethical and Political Contexts*. We believe that by adding 'in practice' to the title, we more clearly reflect our view that social work research is another social work method or approach, in addition to the more well-known case, group, and community work that are seen by some people as 'real' social work.

Our book is intended as a practical guide to negotiating the ethical and political issues associated with different ways of knowing in social work research. We aim to show that social work research, like all social work practice, has to recognize the importance of ethical and political contexts that influence practice. We show how social work research, along with other practice approaches, can realize the emancipatory goals and objectives of social work. We look at how research can improve practice. We take the approach that practice as direct service to clients may inform important research questions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of policies that shape social work practice and service delivery. Our approach shows how to practice research in anti-oppressive ways, so we do not have a separate chapter on anti-oppressive research.

However, in addition to changing the title of our book to better emphasize our interest in the emancipatory aims of social work achieved through research, in this new edition we also include important developments in the social work that have emerged since 2004 when the first edition of our book was published. These developments include:

- participatory research practice that involves service users, including a specific application as child-centred research
- evidence-based practice that emerged in health and medicine and is now a commonly used concept in social work, and associated debates that incorporate different ways of knowing
- multidisciplinary professional practice that usually involves different ways of knowing, and approaches to 'evidence' as legitimate knowledge, with implications for research

Fundamentally, these additional dimensions consider what knowledge-for-practice is, how it may be generated, what is considered to be legitimate ways of knowing and generating such knowledge for practice: all of these issues underlie research as an approach to social work practice (D'Cruz, 2009: 70–73). We aim to show how social work research is an important way of contributing to social work theory and knowledge. Finally, we hope that, as a result of reading this book, you will start to appreciate and understand social work research and even become passionate about it!

## Challenges in teaching, learning and doing research

The aims of this book and the approach taken are a way of addressing some of the fears and misconceptions that may exist among many social work students and also practitioners with regard to research. The general aversion to social work research is almost a standing joke, coming from knowledge of our own student days, much shared knowledge by social work educators, and our own experiences of teaching social work research. Such attitudes have not changed over the years, with familiar descriptions given by many social work educators of students 'bad-mouthing' research (Epstein, 1987: 1) and students and practitioners having 'a phobia' (Marlow, 2011: 2) about research. These attitudes are based on much misinformation, for example, that research is only about 'numbers' or that it is 'cold and impersonal'. For some social workers and students, research is simply 'an added complication to their everyday working lives' (Gibbs and Stirling, 2010: 441).

Aside from the aversion that some social work students and practitioners have to learning and doing social work research, we have also noticed that the processes of learning and doing research pose particular challenges. Social workers are familiar with the mantra of 'applying theory to practice', and there is a considerable literature that investigates the connections between knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice in social work as well as other 'helping professions', such as nursing, medicine, and psychiatry (D'Cruz, Jacobs and Schoo, 2009a; Greenberg, 2009; Hardy and Smith, 2008; Higgs et al., 2004; Holmes, 2009).

We believe that learning and doing in research is challenging for social workers who tend to work inductively – from the specific and practical back to the theory in their actual practice (Healy, 2000: 145–147). Social work research therefore represents the application of abstract and general concepts ('theory') in specific research projects ('practice') in a way that differs from what is easier and more familiar for most social workers. For research as a practice method, you must first know and understand the different dimensions of research, why they are important, related concepts, and how and when to apply concepts in your own research. This is what applying theory to practice means – without losing sight of the necessity for questioning when formal theories do not adequately apply to practice. This means that even if one learns the prescribed ways of doing research and the concepts described in research texts, quite often one's own research challenges some of these received ideas because of the special and particular circumstances of the chosen project. For example, you may want to collaborate doing research with people with disabilities – which may require you to develop appropriate methodologies to achieve this (see Stevenson, 2010) – by drawing on what is already known and modifying it with the guidance of expert advisers, which includes the group of research participants (Pitts and Smith, 2007).

We teach research to social work students because we believe that social work practice is more likely to be effective when social workers are able to draw on and evaluate previous research. We hope to encourage and assist social workers to conduct their own research to answer those questions arising in their practice that cannot be answered by the existing literature. By the end of this chapter, we hope that you will recognize the importance of research for social work practice. By the end of the book, you should be able to read and critique the social work research literature and develop your ideas about how you might answer the questions that arise for you in your professional practice. There is potential for social work research to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of this or that policy in addressing the problems that particular groups may experience, such as (un)employment, income support, child welfare and health, asylum seekers and refugees, aged care, disability support services (Fawcett et al., 2010: 143–158). Here are some examples of research conducted by social workers:

- 'Understanding resilience in South Australian farm families' (Greenhill et al., 2009)
- 'Conceptualising the mental health of rural women: A social work and health promotion perspective' (Harvey, 2009)
- 'Perspectives of young people in care about their school-to-work transition' (Tilbury et al., 2009)

- “‘You’ve got to be a saint to be a social worker’”. The (mis)operation of fitness to practise processes for students already registered onto English social work training programmes’ (McLaughlin, 2010)
- ‘Women with cognitive impairment and unplanned or unwanted pregnancy: A 2-year audit of women contacting the Pregnancy Advisory Service’ (Burgen, 2010)
- ‘Life story work and social work practice: A case study with ex-prisoners labelled as having an intellectual disability’ (Ellem and Wilson, 2010)
- ‘Using vignettes to evaluate the outcomes of student learning: Data from the evaluation of the new social work degree in England’ (MacIntyre et al., 2011)

Apart from informing practice and policy change as an immediate concern, research also contributes to social work theory and knowledge-for-practice (Adams et al., 2005; Lyons and Taylor, 2004; Powell et al., 2004), in a complex relationship.

Depending on the aims of the research and the methods used, you can investigate structural patterns of distribution of resources, rewards, opportunities, and burdens, for example, gender pay equity or comparing the health and wellbeing indicators for indigenous (First Nations) peoples and non-indigenous people in the community. You can also investigate the situated patterns of such structural distributions: whether and how individuals within such identity categories as ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘indigenous’, ‘non-indigenous’ experience such inequalities in their daily lives; how they may explain their experiences; how their experiences may differ from or be the same as the structural patterns; and how they may resist, subvert, and otherwise transform situated patterns of privilege and inequality. In short, research can allow us to appreciate structural patterns of human experience and also contribute to understanding the diversity of human experiences, with the approaches being complementary rather than oppositional (Hurley, 2007). However, to achieve appropriate recognition from decision makers, we must make sure that our research is of high quality and is intellectually rigorous.

## What is research?

In our experience, many social work students (and practitioners) reject research because of particular images they have of research and researchers. Before reading any further, you may like to spend a few minutes on the exercise below. This exercise is intended to exorcise any demons associated with the word ‘research’ and explore ways of engaging with what you might enjoy about it.

## Exercise: Exorcising the demons and becoming enchanted with research

- 1 Write the word 'research' on a piece of paper. Underneath it write down all the 'scary thoughts' that come to mind when you think about 'doing research'. Now write down any positive thoughts you may also have in a separate list.
- 2 Next, think about how you will approach the following task. You think you may be eligible for some welfare, education or housing benefits (for example, social security, money to assist you to study, rent assistance) provided by the government or private organizations. How will you go about finding out about what is available and whether or not you are eligible to receive these benefits? Write down the steps you will take.
- 3 Now think about another process you used to find out more about something you had limited knowledge of previously. Write down what you did to find out about it.
- 4 Look at the headings or descriptions you have given to the processes of enquiry in these two examples. (Remember, we are looking at what you did – that is, the *process*, not the specific *content*, of the enquiry. The aim is to be able to see some equivalence between the steps we take to solve problems of limited knowledge as everyday practices and those linked with the more formal processes called 'research'.)
- 5 Do you see any ways in which you can translate the headings you gave to your processes of enquiry into the more formal language of social research? You may be familiar with some of these formal concepts already. Alternatively, you may want to browse through the later chapters in this book where these concepts appear. Don't worry if these connections are not immediately apparent. They will become clearer as you engage with and reflect on what we discuss in later chapters. We also encourage you to discuss your ideas with peers and friends.
- 6 Now write down the word 'enquiry' and the positive and negative meanings associated with it. How might the word 'enquiry' be related to the word 'research'? How might you 'control the demons' (if you have any) and maximize the positive meanings associated with the word 'research'?
- 7 Keep these thoughts as a starting point against which to review your engagement with this subject as you read and use this book.

We have used this exercise to introduce you to some of the processes we already use to live in daily life. 'We are surrounded by research', for example, to raise children, reduce crime, improve public health, and evaluate public policies (Neuman, 2006: 1). We want to show you that research does not have to be anxiety-provoking, involving complicated statistics, computers, or large amounts of resources. However, at the same time, research does require us to be systematic and thoughtful; to be able to think critically; to be reflective on what we know, how we know, and why we want to know; and to be

prepared to change our minds if research outcomes offer new insights. Just because 'authority', 'tradition', 'common sense', or 'personal experience' have previously informed us (Neuman, 2006: 2–7), it does not mean that we have trustworthy information. This book adds to these dimensions, the ethical and political complexities associated with different ways of knowing that involve competing claims for what is 'trustworthy' knowledge.

## The connections between social work research, practice and theory

While the activity you have done and the related discussion suggest that research is 'seeking knowledge for a purpose', we want to extend this to incorporate the ethical and political dimensions that are essential to social work research. In recent years, social work research has become an important part of social work qualifying degrees and continuing professional education for practitioners (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2003, 2012; Humphries, 2008: 2; International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), 2001; The College of Social Work (TCSW) (England), 2012). This development is partly a response to government and organizational demands for 'evidence', as 'useful and relevant knowledge' (Humphries, 2008: 2) to support policy development and to inform professional practice (Fawcett et al., 2010: 145–153). It is also a recognition by the social work profession internationally that research is an important method of generating knowledge-for-practice as 'evidence' of 'what works' (Smith, 2009: 37–53), as well as developing theories for practice (IASSW, 2001; Powell et al., 2004). Therefore, the idea of 'research-mindedness' (Everitt, 2008; Humphries, 2008; Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS), 2011–12) has become a key competency for all social workers and is supported by resources such as those on the IRISS (2011–12) website.

However, Humphries (2008: 3) goes on to raise the debates also associated with being research-minded, including what is 'knowledge'; what is research and in whose interests it is conducted; the hierarchy of knowledge; instrumental versus political knowledge; and extends this to include ethics and justice as a set of principles:

- participatory/developmental model of social work, as opposed to a social control model;
- anti-oppressive values;
- striving towards a genuine partnership between practitioners and those who [sic] they serve (Humphries, 2008: 3–4, citing Campling's foreword to Everitt et al., 1992: vii).



You might notice that these valued principles for social work research are not at all different from those informing other areas of social work practice; for example, where social work researchers advocate 'empowerment' of clients as a purpose of research (Marlow, 2011: 21–22; McLaughlin, 2012; Smith, 2009), consistent with anti-oppressive practice.

As applied to social work research, these principles mean that clients are not treated as objects or exploited for their experiential knowledge, particularly when they are often vulnerable and relatively powerless. Instead, these principles validate different ways of 'knowing', which are shared and made explicit as much as possible in the interaction between 'researcher' and 'informant', also referred to as 'participant' to better reflect the espoused collaborative nature of the research process. Subjectivity, as personal experience and world-views, is also valued and understood as being integral to knowledge gained in the research process. Taken together, you might begin to see some validity to our earlier claim that social work research is another method that can help achieve social work's emancipatory objectives.

## Professionalism and research in social work

The human services professions have been subject to many contemporary contextual changes. These include changing welfare regimes, new systems of public management, transformations in communications and information technologies, the impacts of globalization and internationalization, the influence of new social movements and post-colonialism, and so on (O'Connor et al., 2008). Consequently, they are confronted with sustaining a viable professionalism both in respect of the clientele they claim to serve and their organizational locations.

As well as understanding research to be a crucial component in the practice of social work, whether that is in direct service provision or policy development, it can also be seen to be significant when it comes to the question of professionalism. In many respects, controversies that surround claims of professionalism on the part of social work are played out in the way research is or isn't held to be relevant and necessary. Of course, these controversies are very much concerned with the place of knowledge and power in professions. As such, they also point to the need to examine the ethical and political dimensions of research and explore the implications for different kinds of professionalism to which social work might lay claim.

For some, the link between research and professionalism in social work has been very clear, particularly in contemporary contexts where managerialism and control may silence criticism of organizational and policy influences on

practice and the effectiveness of interventions. The introduction of performance management strategies within the public services generally, for example, now requires compliance with predetermined standards. These standards will have variously to do with criteria such as efficiency, quality and effectiveness. The production of such standards may or may not have been informed by studies that have sought to evaluate programmes and performance. Professionalism in this context could then well become associated with the appropriation of research to generate standards by means of the systematic evaluation of a given programme or performance. Professional behaviour would then be monitored for compliance with these standards, such that research knowledge has become part of the organizational governance system, for example, as Plath (2012) describes in a case study of how organizations use 'evidence' to guide policy and practice.

Additionally, there are increasing expectations for multidisciplinary and inter-professional practice including research (D'Cruz, Jacobs and Schoo, 2009a), to improve services to clients through different perspectives on multifaceted and multicausal problems (e.g. Atwal and Caldwell, 2006; Corner, 2003; Miller, 2009; National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, n.d.; Salmon, 1994; van Norman, 1998; Woolnough, Arkell with Tobias, 2010). Although there are clear benefits for multidisciplinary approaches to professional knowledge-for and -in practice, there are also tensions associated with different ways of knowing in professional teams (D'Cruz et al., 2009b; Holmes, 2009: 63–65; Lawn and Battersby, 2009; Sheean and Cameron, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). It is important to contextualize the contribution of research as it occurs in each of these respects.

The growth of interest in evidence-based practice within human services is a further example of the way in which professional, organizational and policy agendas can combine to develop a strategic direction for research and practice that supposedly meets a number of needs (Smith, 2009: 17–34). For some, evidence-based practice represents an overdue 'coming of age' for the social work profession, one in which it can legitimate its place not so much by exhorting social values (or ideologies) but by the irrefutable evidence of its effectiveness and utility (Sheldon, 1998, 2000, 2001). For others, evidence-based practice is an unavoidable and not unattractive pathway to gaining credibility for the profession with key stakeholders and a necessary development in sustaining and promoting its contribution (see Sheldon and Chilvers, 2000). A fit has also been noted between the liberal individualism that underpins both contemporary public policy and those professional activities most amenable to being evaluated on 'hard evidence' (Howe, 1997; Humphries, 2008: 4–6). Fundamentally, debates about evidence-based practice relate to what social work knowledge-for-practice is, and includes questions about

what is knowledge, what constitutes evidence, and how we may best derive such evidence for professional knowledge (Butler and Pugh, 2004; Dominelli, 2005; Fawcett et al., 2010: 143–147; McLaughlin, 2007; Smith, 2009: 49–53; Webb, 2001). What is increasingly important is that social workers should make connections between ‘the academy’ and ‘the field’, formal theory and research, and practice-generated theories and practice-based research, which includes service users’ perspectives, as bases for social work knowledge-for-practice (D’Cruz, 2009: 69–73).

The effective pursuit of equality is seen as dependent on a properly informed analysis prior to action. While social values and goals still drive the professional agenda, research enters as a vital part of the professional repertoire in directing efforts towards these ends. Moreover, the reference points that can come from research are construed as important in sustaining purposeful action that might otherwise become diverted or misplaced (Humphries, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Shaw, 2005; Smith, 2009).

The research-minded practitioner asks questions such as:

- Does it work?
- Does it achieve what was intended?
- Is it worthwhile?
- Is it worth the resources, money and time?
- Is it ‘good’?
- Is it ‘bad’?
- Is it ‘good enough’? (Everitt, 2008: 26)

Research as an antidote to the ‘taken-for-granted’ is a common theme in discussions of its contribution to professionalism. Whether it is preparedness to ‘think the unthinkable’ or show ‘uncommon common sense’, research is presented as a safeguard against practice becoming a matter of routine, or proceeding on the basis of unexamined assumptions (Humphries, 2008: 4–6; Rubin and Babbie, 2007: 3–20).

If we consider research in terms of its capacity to invigorate and inform professional behaviour, then we might begin to list some of the ways in which this could become manifest. Here are some examples of the contributions of research in this respect, which are to:

- add to the sum of our knowledge
- address a specific issue of concern
- find out what our clients think of our services
- ascertain social needs in a particular area
- develop a submission
- influence policymakers
- organize people

- translate individual needs into a social voice
- give vulnerable, hidden and unheard people a voice
- change the ways in which things are done
- evaluate and improve services
- develop and test new interventions (Everitt, 2008; Fawcett et al., 2010: 145–158; Marlow, 2011; Smith, 2009)

Running through these ideas about research and professionalism is the assumption that knowledge generated as a result of research can challenge existing practices and policies and help keep the profession up to date by continually improving its services for the public good. The suggestion, then, is that professionalism, and the survival of a professional group, is dependent at least to some degree on being responsive to new and changing situations, and is innovative in the form and nature of the expertise it claims to offer.

Processes for generating and managing knowledge within the organizational and policy spheres of public services are significant for understanding the emerging relationships between professionalism and research (Jones, 2004; Powell et al., 2004). Of course, new technologies are texturing these processes in particular ways and becoming part of the emerging politics and ethics of knowledge and research. Meanwhile, concurrent contextual changes are substantively affecting definitions and purposes of professionalism with regard to its relationship with service clientele. When hierarchical models of professional expertise are aligned with colonizing patterns of Western society, new versions of professionalism are required if the credibility of the human services within an anti-colonialist context is to be sustained (Ife, 2001). This, too, has immediate consequences for understanding research politics and ethics, if research is to remain a constituent and vibrant feature of the new professionalism. An appreciation of diverse paradigms (ways of knowing) and methodologies (ways of building knowledge) can assist the contribution of research to the kinds of critically aware professionalism required to meet the array of contemporary challenges for social work.

## Critical thinking, reflexivity and research

Research, it has been suggested, involves ‘thinking systematically’. As we undertake research, we engage with an array of information that arises from our interaction with books, journals, files, databases, participants, colleagues, agencies, and so on. The orderly generation and processing of information demands of us an intellectual discipline that extends our everyday capacities for doing just that. An important aspect of this intellectual discipline concerns critical thinking.

There are several traditions of critical thinking in Western societies, all of which have implications for the conduct of social work research and practice. Perhaps the most dominant has been that associated with philosophical branches of argumentation and reasoning:

Critical reasoning is centrally concerned with giving reasons for one's beliefs and actions, analysing and evaluating one's own and other people's reasoning, devising and constructing better reasoning. Common to these activities are certain discrete skills, for example, recognizing reasons and conclusions, recognizing unstated assumptions, drawing conclusions, appraising evidence and evaluating statements, judging whether conclusions are warranted; and underlying all of these skills is the ability to use language with clarity and discrimination. (Thomson, 1996: 2)

This variety of critical thinking has found its place in social work research as a result of attempts to introduce the tenets of 'scientific reasoning' into the ways practitioners might appraise knowledge in everyday practice. Neuman (2006: 2–7) discusses how reasoning might be improved by learning how to spot common fallacies and ways of knowing, as 'alternatives to research' that are common to our daily lives. These alternatives, which exert significant influence on the beliefs we hold strongly include 'authority' and 'tradition' (parents, teachers and experts), 'common sense', 'media myths', and 'personal experience'. While such approaches to everyday knowledge may be a personal choice, for social work practice they may not offer sound knowledge about the effectiveness of particular interventions, or the harm that may be an unanticipated consequence, while aiming to solve perceived problems. Some examples include the negative outcomes associated with the placement of children in foster care, even if for their protection (Erera, 2002: 46–47), or the additional stress caused to children in investigations for 'sexual abuse' (Davis, 2005). Similarly, the attention to 'confounders' (Gibbs, 1991) is seen to provide a safeguard against drawing dubious conclusions about the relationship between interventions and outcomes by highlighting flaws in causal reasoning (see also Neuman, 2006: 63–69). Logical thinking and formal scientific method become the way to advance the state of knowledge in practice, although we have a broader view of 'science' as systematic, disinterested, open-minded, honest, and critical thinking (Marlow, 2011: 6–7) rather than experimental, laboratory-based research.

The added dimension now current within critical thinking concerns the place of critical reflection and reflexivity. In attending to processes of thinking, critical reflection is also concerned with 'the thinker' but locates subjectivities particularly within socio-political contexts. There is still very much a hunt for assumptions, but now it is to do with how they shape the way we construct problems, needs, issues and so on, and a critical appraisal of what those

assumptions might tell us about the contexts and histories of which we are a part (Grbich, 2007: 17–18).

While such explorations take us into personal, experiential realms, they imply the capacity to become not just more self-aware, but socially self-aware (Fook, 1999). Within this approach, our contributions to knowledge-building via research would be seen as embedded within the everyday construction of sets of beliefs and practices ('discourses'), where claims to legitimacy have to do with the subtle and not so subtle exercise of power. Here, the concept of reflexivity assists in sustaining a sense of agency (a capacity to act purposefully) within this complicated process of knowledge construction.

Reflexivity works with the idea that knowledge 'is made rather than revealed' (Taylor and White, 2000: 199). In practising reflexively, we become directly concerned with 'the constructedness of all claims, including our own' (Hall, 1997: 250, cited in Taylor and White, 2000: 199). Such a view accentuates rather than dilutes our responsibilities as knowledge makers. It requires us to consider how power is exercised in the knowledge-making processes in which we engage. Furthermore, locating ourselves within these operations of power is seen as an intensely moral action. Reflexivity suggests that we cannot find refuge from moral responsibility by following principles of good research practice. The principles are not inviolate, but sustained by the success of the discourses in which they are embedded and are there to be continually scrutinized. Meanwhile, research practice necessitates the interpretation and reconstruction of principles amid competing imperatives, occurring within complicated and contradictory social contexts that more often than not render simple rule-following redundant.

This kind of approach to research can make life difficult. It is a cautionary antidote to the false certainties sometimes evident in research textbooks that seem to imply we can learn how to do research by learning a new set of techniques. Of course, the plethora of techniques that have become part of research tradition within Western societies are there to be learned and their associated skills acquired. Yet, research cannot be spared the debates that have entered into the examination of social practices. Inasmuch as we conceive research as being a social practice concerned explicitly with the generation of knowledge, we will have to contend with difficult questions concerning the political and ethical dimensions of our knowledge making.

## Social work research as a social practice

If we were to make social work research itself the subject of research enquiry, what are some of the questions we might pose? We might find ourselves asking some of the following, for example:

- Who carries out research?
- Who decides what is to be researched?
- Where do the resources (time and money) for research come from?
- What permissions are obtained in order for research to proceed?
- What in practice do researchers do?
- Who reads reports of research?
- What influence does research have?
- Who benefits from research?

By asking questions such as these, we are led to enquiries concerning the social organization, political economy and professionalization of research, and the sociology of research knowledge, and so on. In other words, we can view social work research as a social practice. How we understand it as a social practice will depend very much on the perspectives we employ.

Viewing research through a liberal lens, for instance, we might understand the social role of the researcher as that of an independent investigator who follows certain codes of conduct and professionally endorsed techniques to produce new knowledge. This knowledge is then put at the disposal of others (policymakers, practitioners, industries, communities) to act on or not, as they see fit. Viewing research through a radical lens, we might construe the researcher as being a social actor whose activities are party to the reproduction and/or transformation of existing social relationships of exclusion or inclusion, domination or oppression. Both processes and outcomes of knowledge production are then considered contributors to social change, and actions weighed accordingly.

As a social practice, we would expect networks to form among like-minded researchers and movements to develop that advocate for their preferred approach to research. It has been commonplace to refer to the 'paradigm wars' that have beset social research in recent decades (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 1, 15 (note 2)). The emergence of evidence-based practice in social welfare has triggered another site of antagonism. User movements have been pursuing the agenda of empowerment in social work research (Beresford, 2000; Braye et al., 2008). Indigenous groups have increasingly promoted consciousness of the colonial history of research, with implications for not only greater cultural sensitivity but also a fundamental rethink of the tenets and methodologies of Western research practices (Smith, 1999, 2005).

In some respects, this suggests that social work research is beset by a series of dilemmas and the erstwhile researcher has to determine where they stand on a number of political and ethical issues before they can proceed. In a cogent critique of 'critical' social research, Hammersley (1995) has warned of the pitfalls of conflating the pursuit of political goals with the activity of research and, particularly, questions the philosophical presuppositions of those who seek to change oppressive social structures by means of research praxis.

Similarly, Rubin and Babbie (2007: 50–53, 2008: 90–94), writing specifically about social work research and the place of politics and values, comment on how politics and ethics intersect and also differ in social (work) research.

Although ethics and politics are often closely intertwined, the ethics of social work research deals more with the methods employed, whereas political issues are more concerned with the practical costs and use of research. (Rubin and Babbie, 2007: 50)

Writing in the US context, they discuss three case studies (Coleman, 1966; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969), aiming to show how ‘nowhere have social research and politics been more controversially intertwined than in the area of race relations’ (Rubin and Babbie, 2007: 51–52, 2008: 92–93). Rubin and Babbie imply that such studies should be critiqued solely according to ‘scientific, methodological grounds’, not political ones (2007: 52, 2008: 93); although we ask whether methodologies can be seen as neutral of their assumptions and therefore the questions that are asked and how they are researched. We ask whether researchers can claim innocence due to claims of neutrality and whether it is possible to investigate social phenomena dispassionately as we do not want to censor alternative or uncomfortable views.

In accentuating social work research as a political and ethical practice, this book presents a rather different way forward. We shall be echoing the sentiments expressed by Fook (2000, 2002), who has argued for an open, inclusive and flexible approach to social work research. Our approach tries to take cognizance of the complicated, changing and uncertain contexts with (and within) which research occurs. Admitting diversity into our practices creates greater possibilities for effective and responsive research.

As Fook (2000: 2) puts it:

A rigid, or even loose, commitment to one type of perspective, be it positivist, qualitative or deconstructive, does not seem to provide the flexibility of thinking needed to work in changing circumstances.

Yet, as Fook also points out, this could lead to the idea that anything goes and, consequently, she defines a crucial issue: ‘can we develop an approach which allows us openness, but also builds upon and uses established methods of working?’ (2000: 2). As we shall try to show, inclusivity in research is not the same as a ‘free for all’ or even an eclectic outlook. Rather, it sees all perspectives and methods as a product of time and place and lacking intrinsic properties that could determine whether or not they are right and appropriate in isolation from the contexts of their application. Embedding themselves and



their research practices within emerging and contingent contexts, the critical researcher adopting an inclusive approach will understand knowledge and skills in research as resources to be 'used in a meaningful yet flexible way to suit the situation at hand' (Fook, 2000: 2). Such judgements of suitability will engage the researcher in political and ethical, as well as technical, considerations, but in none of these domains can the researcher rely on pre-existing sets of principles or rules to tell them what is to be done.

## The organization of the book

This chapter has explored conceptions held of social work research and suggested an alternative framing as social enquiry. It has introduced the relevance of research to social work and suggested how it is integral to the historic missions of the profession.

The book follows sequentially the major stages of the research process. The eight chapters emanate from the following key questions.

- What is the relevance of research to social work?
- What do I want to know more about?
- How might I answer my research question?
- How do I make sense of my data so that I can answer my research question?
- How do I pull all this together and communicate it to others?

This first chapter has also outlined the political and ethical dimensions of social work research and developed these by considering research as a social practice concerned with knowledge making. Chapter 2 determines a focus for research and a research question(s) as this represents the beginning of the process. Chapter 3 examines how knowledge involves different ways of knowing, as perspectives on and assumptions about the world, with particular practical, ethical and political implications. Evidence-based practice is a particular example of such debates, as different ways of knowing encapsulating assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and how one generates such knowledge for professional practice.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 look at the matter of answering research questions. This starts with a consideration of methodology, in Chapter 4, as the ways in which we might go about making knowledge. Chapter 5 discusses the more practical task of creating an appropriate plan or design for pursuing research question(s). Additionally, we look at ethical practice in social work research, particularly in regard to participatory and child-centred approaches. Chapter 6 examines specific methods for collecting and generating data. We show how methods used and the type of data generated are affected by the

degree of structure introduced by the researcher. Chapter 7 addresses the sense making in research. In drawing links with the theoretical and methodological considerations considered earlier, this approach to analysis aims to ensure proper integrity of the research. The final chapter discusses how research is reported and disseminated. It assumes that this is not a neutral exercise, but that communication needs to pay due regard to the perspectives and positions from which reports are, for example, read and written. The book concludes with a last look at research as social practice and the challenges of being a critical and inclusive researcher. Throughout, we show that conceptualizing and conducting research involves political and ethical considerations.

## Putting it all together

Social work research is both simpler and more complicated than is sometimes imagined. Considered as an informal process of social enquiry, it is not so far removed from what we find ourselves doing every day when faced with a novel question or situation. If we think of social work as an occupation that is, by and large, dealing with the novel, then we can see how its practitioners find themselves engaging in processes of enquiry as an integral part of their work. In that sense, research is familiar territory, already part of our professional and personal worlds, even if we haven't labelled it as such.

The complexities of research arise as we formalize our processes of enquiry. We have available to us a rich resource about the doing of research that offers us more rigorous and systematic ways of building knowledge. However, we need to remain conscious that the knowledge we generate by using these more formal approaches represents particular ways of knowing. Opening the doors of research means accessing discourses that have a certain currency in securing legitimacy for claims to knowledge and truth. In the chapters to come, we shall be introducing accumulated bodies of teaching concerned with building knowledge by means of research practices. Beyond this, however, we shall be presenting research as a social practice, politically and ethically laden, which carries a special responsibility for those who choose to pursue it. We shall, therefore, be extending the idea of a critical researcher, presenting this as someone who is able to draw flexibly and inclusively on a range of research practices according to their appreciation of the situation in hand and the social dimensions of their knowledge making.

## Further reading

- Everitt, A. (2008) 'Social work research and evaluation: the research-minded practitioner', *Locus SOCI@L*, 1: 24–31.
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- Kayrooz, C. and Trevitt, C. (2005) *Research in Organizations and Communities: Tales from the Real World*, Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin (Chapter 1).
- McLaughlin, H. (2012) *Understanding Social Work Research* (2nd edition), London: Sage (Chapter 1).