Research, social work and professional practice

Introduction

There were many reasons for us to write this book. The title – Social Work Research: Ethical and Political Contexts – encapsulates what we see as important aspects of social work research, ones that are fundamental to achieving the emancipatory aims of social work rather than yet another set of techniques to be either mastered or avoided. However, we have an ongoing questioning attitude – how is research an essential part of social work and how can it be both ethical and political? We hope that these are questions that you, too, will consider as you read and use this book.

We show how 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 as ‘traditional’ or, for some people, ‘real’ social work. Therefore, we show how social work research, along with other practice approaches, can realize the emancipatory goals and objectives of social work. Furthermore, we make links between social work research and direct service approaches, looking at how one can inform the other – how research can improve practice and practice experiences can influence what and how we research. This book also makes links with perhaps another poor relation in the social work repertoire of approaches – that of social policy as practice. For this book, 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. Social work research is also 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!

The aims of this book

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.

This general ‘attitude’ has been well captured by Dr Epstein (1987: 71), Professor of Social Work at Hunter College in New York and a teacher of social work research:

No other part of the social work curriculum has been so consistently received by students with as much groaning, moaning, eye-rolling, bad-mouthing, hyperventilation and waiver-strategizing as the research courses.

As Marlow (2001: 2) notes, this phobia about research is not only restricted to students but also includes social work professionals, to whom she addressed the following statement:

Social workers often express ... suspicion and even a phobia about research. Have you ever skimmed over articles in social work journals because you were intimidated by the language and the displays of results? Have you ever shuddered at the thought of undertaking a research project? If so, you are not alone. Because research is typically associated with mathematics, you may not be enthusiastic about applying what is perceived as a cold, impersonal approach to human needs and problem solving. After all, most social workers want to work with people, not numbers.

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 some of the social work research literature and have some ideas as to how you might answer some of the questions that may arise for you in your professional practice.

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.

As Marlow (2001: 2) goes on to write:

When you are equipped with the knowledge and skills to apply research methods, you will also know how to answer many of the questions that arise in your role as a generalist social worker, such as these:

- Are my visits to Mrs Garcia really helping her cope with the death of her husband? What is her experience of the grief counselling?
- How effective is programme X in providing services that support and protect victims of domestic violence? What are the experiences of the clients receiving these services?
- What are the needs of adolescent fathers in City Y? What is it like to be a teenage father in City Y?

We would add, how effective and appropriate is this or that policy in addressing the problems that particular groups may experience? Examples of policies
include (un)employment, income support, child welfare and health. You will no doubt know from your own lived experience and/or from your social work practice that many policies are less than effective in changing the disadvantaged circumstances of many people – and some may even appear to worsen the problems they purport to address.

Apart from informing practice and policy change as an immediate concern, research also contributes to social work theory, as generated from practice. This differs from the view that theory (as ‘top-down knowledge’) is imposed on practice or, even worse, separate from or irrelevant to practice. The connection between ‘theory’, ‘practice’ and ‘research’ is emphasized by Fook (1996) in *The Reflective Researcher*. The generation of social work theory from practice, as a reflective approach, positions the practitioner centrally within the research process, represented as an ongoing enquiry into everyday social work practice:

> a reflective stance questions the ways in which theory, practice and research and the relationships between them have been formulated. … theory and research do not necessarily precede practice … but … theory is often implicit in practice and is unavoidably integrated with it. … Any useful theory therefore needs to be modified by and responsive to the uncertainties of practice. Any approach to understanding social work should necessarily integrate theorizing, researching and practising. A process of reflection on practice might thus involve the potential for theory development, research enquiry and practice improvement. (Fook, 1996: xiii)

Finally, social work research can meet political objectives, of addressing broader social, organizational and cultural differences manifested as inequalities and ‘interlocking oppressions’ (Yeatman, 1995) associated with gender, race, ethnicity, culture, class, disability, age, sexual preference and even geographical location. In sociological terms, these are known as ‘structural inequalities’, which social work has a key role in addressing, by promoting social justice. Social work research can play a significant part in social change by focusing on personal and collective experiences of structural inequality and recommending strategies for change. However, to achieve appropriate recognition from decisionmakers, we must make sure that our research is of high quality and intellectually rigorous.

**What is research?**

In our experience, many social work students (and practitioners) reject research because of particular images they have of it 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.
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.

When you have completed this exercise, compare your thoughts with those of sociologist Connell (1975, in Wadsworth, 1997: 6):
Research is something that anyone can do, and everyone ought to do. It is, simply collecting information and thinking systematically about it. The word ‘research’ carries overtones of abstruse statistics, and complex methods, white coats and computers. Some social research is highly specialized, but most of it is not; much of the best work is logically very straightforward. Useful research on many problems can be done with small resources, and should be the regular part of the life of any thoughtful person involved in social action.

If we take up Connell’s idea that research ‘is simply collecting information and thinking systematically about it’, you might find that you have done exactly this in the exercise above. Although we might not think of it as such, research is one activity that many of us are engaged in every day. Perhaps we use phrases such as ‘trial and error’ or ‘making enquiries’ or ‘finding out about’, rather than ‘research’. We may not even conceive of our actions as being research, but it is the process rather than conscious intent that determines whether or not we are engaging in research.

The connections between social work research, practice and theory

While the exercise you have done and the above quotes 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. Everitt et al. (1992: vii) refer to this as ‘research-mindedness’, by which means research and practice can be interrelated within ‘certain intellectual and professional principles’. The three principles of ‘research-mindedness’ are summarized below and will be revisited in different ways in subsequent chapters:

- a participatory/developmental model of social work, as opposed to a social control model
- anti-oppressive values
- a genuine partnership between practitioners and those whom they serve (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. Therefore, as applied to social work research, the principles mean that clients are not treated as objects whose knowledge gained from lived experience is exploited, particularly when they are often vulnerable and relatively powerless. Instead, these principles validate different bases of ‘knowing’, which are shared and made explicit as much as possible in the interaction between ‘researcher’ and ‘informant’. Subjectivity, as personal experience and worldviews, 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.
Marlow (2001) has another way of conceptualizing the connections between social work research and practice. In Table 1.1 (Marlow, 2001: 25) summarizes ‘the relationship between research and practice’.

The main aim of Marlow’s (2001) discussion of the relationship between research and social work practice is to minimize what may intimidate us about social work research by showing how it often relies on knowledge, skills and processes that are already familiar to social work practitioners. Like Everitt et al. (1992), Marlow emphasizes ‘empowerment-based practice’ (Marlow, 2001: 21). She says that both social work practice and research follow particular stages or phases in which similar objectives may be achieved on behalf of client groups. However, Marlow names these stages differently, depending on whether they are associated with ‘research’ or ‘practice’. We would comment that we do not necessarily see research (or, indeed, practice) as a set of neatly sequential stages or phases. Instead, we know from our own experience and that of others (see, for example, Arber, 1993a: 32–50; Mason, 1996) that human behaviour and interactions are rarely so tidy and predictable. However, in dissipating fears about social work research, Marlow’s approach is very helpful.

### Professionalism and research in social work

As well as understanding research to be a crucial component in the practice of social work, whether that be 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:

If the purpose of the craft of welfare professionalism is to strive towards human well-being, justice and equality, then intellectual work and research is fundamental to reveal the structures and mechanisms that generate and maintain inequality. (Everitt et al., 1992: 3)

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:

Research-minded practice is concerned with the analytical assessment of social need and resources, and the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies to meet that need. It is not constrained by organizational or professional boundaries ... The taken-for-granted becomes subject to critical scrutiny. (Everitt et al., 1992: 4)

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.

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. O’Connor et al. (1995: 222–3) offer 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 hidden and unheard people a voice
- change the ways in which things are done
- develop and test new interventions.

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 innovative
in the form and nature of the expertise it claims to offer.

The human services professions, however, have themselves been subject
to many contemporary contextual changes. These include changing welfare
regimes, new systems of public management, transformations in communica-
tions and information technologies, the impacts of globalization and inter-
nationalization, influence of new social movements and post-colonialism, and
so on (O'Connor et al., 2000). Consequently, they are confronted with sustaining
a viable professionalism both in respect of the clientele they claim to serve and
their organizational locations. It is important to contextualize the contribution
of research as it occurs in each of these respects.

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 effi-
ciency, 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 asso-
ciated 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.

The growth of interest in evidence-based practice within human services is a
further example of the way in which professional, organizational and policy agen-
das can combine to develop a strategic direction for research and practice that
supposedly meets a number of needs. For some, evidence-based practice repre-
sents 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). 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).

The emergence of centres, institutions and networks devoted to the cause of
evidence-based practice in social work and human services marks a significant
trend in the configuration of research and practice. In her appraisal, Trinder
(2000a) notes how the approach has attracted both ‘champions and critics’ and
examines a series of practical and conceptual issues that arise in pursuit of prac-
tice based on research evidence. These include the feasibility of generating an
evidence base to inform practice, privileging of certain kinds of evidence,
impact that disseminating research findings may or may not have on practice,
policy and decision making; scope or otherwise for evidence-based practice to
be responsive to consumer concerns and so on.
Trinder herself asserts that ‘research is an inherently political process’ (2000a: 237). In recommending that the ‘definition of evidence should be broadened’ and the ‘claims of evidence-based practice should be narrowed’ (2000a: 237), she is adopting a position very similar to the one taken in this book. In order to realize the potential of research evidence and align this with practice and policy improvement, it is important for professionals to develop an understanding of the political and ethical dimensions of generating knowledge. As we shall see, this includes, much in the way Trinder (2000a: 237) suggests:

a greater degree of reflexivity amongst researchers, reviewers and practitioners to think about what assumptions about the world are taken for granted and what questions and answers are not addressed or precluded by particular pieces of research or particular research designs.

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). 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 the understanding of 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. Gibbs (1991) suggests, for example, that reasoning might be improved by learning how to spot common fallacies and ‘confounders’. Some common fallacies invoked are the appeal to experience, authority, tradition and the uncritical acceptance of documented ideas or testimonials by practitioners or clients regarding the effectiveness of particular methods. Similarly, the attention to confounders is seen to provide a safeguard against drawing dubious conclusions about the relationship between interventions and outcomes by highlighting flaws in causal reasoning. Logical thinking and formal scientific method become the way to advance the state of knowledge in practice.

Other traditions have influenced the approach to critical thinking and, particularly, the development of such capabilities:

Being a critical thinker involves more than cognitive activities such as logical reasoning or scrutinizing arguments for assertions unsupported by empirical evidence. Thinking critically involves our recognizing the assumptions underlying our beliefs and behaviours. (Brookfield, 1987: 13)

One finds here greater attention to personal and cultural factors and wariness of too narrow an approach that would divorce the operations of rationality from the humanity of the thinker. To this extent, ‘critical thinking involves a reflective dimension’ (Brookfield, 1987: 14). The reflective process invites the exploration of experiences, meanings and interpretations, without which the creativity of imagining and acting on alternatives is seen to be severely limited.

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 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.

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, 1993: 156–9). 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 knowledgemakers. 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 associate skills acquired. Yet, research cannot be spared the debates that have entered into the examination of social practices. In as much as we conceive of 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 on to enquiries concerning the social organization of research, political economy of research, professionalization
of research, 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 (Reid, 1994). 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 and Evans, 1999). 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 (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

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 (1995a) 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.

However, 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**

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 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. 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. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss, broadly, the use of research in social work. Determining a focus for research and a research question(s) for our enquiry represents the beginning of the process. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a consideration of how knowledge is located in perspectives on, and assumptions about, the world, with particular practical, ethical and political implications.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 look at the matter of answering research questions. This starts with a consideration of methodology, which concerns 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). Chapter 6 examines specific methods for collecting and generating data. In both conceptualizing and conducting research, the political and ethical aspects are emphasized.

Chapter 7 addresses the issue of 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 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.

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**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.