

Chapter 4

Problem Formulation

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Overview

- Selecting a Topic
- The Influence of Paradigms
- The Influence of Theories
- Other influences on Social Work Research

Thinking about a research topic



There are a number of areas that you might consider as you begin or refine your research topic.

- (1) Special populations
- (2) Social Problems
- (3) Target client groups
- (4) Services that promote change in clients

Narrowing your Research Topic

There are two related themes that can help frame your research topic & assist you in beginning to form your research question:

(1) Relevance: How important is your topic area – *Does it pass the “so what”* question?

(2) Practice-based: How will this topic (and research question) inform practice?

Relevance of research topic



- Felt Need: What's the “so what” – Why is this research important?
- Scientific Merit: What are the gaps in understanding?

Examples of how *felt need & scientific merit* can be found in the beginning of most journal articles where the literature is reviewed.

Example: Describing the “*Felt Need*”

An Exploratory Study of Substance Abuse Among Latino Older Adults (Andrews, 2008)

- What are the estimates of geriatric substance abuse?
- What are binge or heavy drinkers?

Example: Describing the “*Felt Need*” (cont.)

- What % present at health or mental health settings?
- What substances are being abused or mis-used?
- What impact does substance abuse in elder Latinos/as have in ...
 - Health-related outcomes

Example: Describing the “*Scientific Merit*”

An Exploratory Study of Substance Abuse Among Latino Older Adults (Andrews, 2008)

In this article Andrews presents the “scientific merit” or the “What are the gaps in understanding or gaps in research?” on pages 90-93.

Several themes are discussed:

- 1) Treatment issues for older adults
- 2) Substance abuse among the Latino population
- 3) Treatment issues for Latino older adults

Example: Describing the “*Scientific Merit*”

Treatment issues for older adults

There are several gaps in understanding about Latino older adults that highlight the importance of this research topic

- Difficulty in identifying drug/alcohol use in older adults
- The “experience” of substance abuse in elders is different from younger adult age groups

Example: Describing the “*Scientific Merit*” (cont.)

Substance Abuse Among the Latino Population

There are several gaps in understanding about Latino older adults that highlight the importance of this research topic

- Clearer understanding about illicit drug use
- What is the need for substance abuse treatment; can we draw from other client populations?

Example: Describing the “*Scientific Merit*” (cont.)

Treatment Considerations: Latino Older Adults

There are several gaps in understanding about treatment strategies for this population.

- What factors are linked to barriers to accessing treatment?
- What cultural factors (eg *familismo*) need to be considered?
- Can assessment strategies for other populations be applied to Latino Older Adults?

Link to Practice



- *You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going 'cause you might not get there!*

Yogi Berra (1998) cited in Chapter 3: Pose a Specific Question of Importance to Your Client's Welfare (Gibbs, 2003)

COPES concepts

One way of making sure that your research question is linked to practice is to pose a question that contains concepts that are

- (1) **C**lient-**O**riented
- (2) **P**ractical &
- (3) **E**vidence-**S**earched

COPES concepts:

Client-oriented

Issues that are “central to the welfare of the client and/or to those whose lives are affected by the client”

Example:

What outreach efforts best result in Latino elders seeking needed services at a community health center?

COPES concepts:

Practical Importance

- Issues that represent problems that arise in practice (

- Example:

How effective are programs designed for older adults with substance abuse problems in serving the needs of Latino elders with substance abuse problems?

COPES concepts: Evidence Search

Are the major concepts in your research question sufficiently specific to be useful in a literature search?

Consider these questions:

- (1) Are your searches resulting in too many sources? *If yes, look at your concepts & be more specific.*
- (2) Do the results of your search help you narrow your focus? *If yes, hurray!*

Question Types

As you think about your research question, consider if your question might fit into one of these:

- (1) Effectiveness,
- (2) Prevention,
- (3) Assessment,
- (4) Description,
- (5) Risk

Selecting a Research Question

- A good research question:
 - Is narrow and specific
 - Is posed in a way that can be answered by observable evidence
 - Addresses the decision-making needs of agencies or practical problems in social welfare
 - Has clear significance for guiding social welfare policy or social work practice
 - Is feasible to answer

Feasibility Issues

- Scope of study
- Time required
- Fiscal costs
- Ethical considerations
- Cooperation required from others
- Obtaining advance authorization

Involving Others in Formulating Research Questions

- Critical feedback from colleagues can:
 - Improve study utility
 - Clarify ideas
 - Uncover alternate approaches to the problem
 - Identify potential pragmatic or ethical obstacles
- Involving agencies in problem formulation and research design planning helps overcome resistance to research

Class Exercise

Formulate a research question about the problem that would be important for the field to answer.

Discuss how important your topic area is and how your topic (and research question) inform practice

- % of your study population, impact of problem, factors impacting the problem, etc.

Discuss Scientific Merit- What are the gaps in understanding in existing research and knowledge? Think about what we have to research on.