

# Chapter 4

# Problem Formulation

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# Overview

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- Selecting a Topic
- Writing Introduction
  - Describing the “Felt Need”, “Scientific merit” and “Research Gap”
  - Linking Research to Practice
- Formulating a Research Question
- 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 population (=Target Population)
- (2) Social Problems
- (3) Target client groups (=Study Population)
- (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 at 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)*

1. What are the estimates of geriatric substance abuse?
2. What % are binge or heavy drinkers among individuals 65 and older?

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

- What % present at health or mental health settings?
- What substances are being abused or mis-used among older adults in the study?
- What impact does substance abuse in elder Latinos/as have in ...
  - Health-related outcomes (Mental health problems, physical health deterioration)
  - Increased hospitalization
  - Longer period treatment
  - Heightened response to alcohol, lower recommended guidelines for use

# 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 page 88- “However, little is known about alcohol and drug use among this group.”

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
- 4) Readiness of the Profession to Respond

# Example: Describing the “*Scientific Merit*”

## Treatment issues for older adults

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

- Clearer understanding about illicit drug use is needed
- What is the need for substance abuse treatment; can we draw from other client populations? Not sure. We need more research into this matter.

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

## Treatment Considerations: Latino Older Adults

There are several gaps in understanding about treatment strategies for Latino Older Adults.

- What factors are linked to barriers to accessing treatment among this group?
- What cultural factors (e.g., *familismo*) need to be considered?
- Can assessment strategies for other populations be applied to Latino Older Adults?

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

## Readiness of the Profession to Respond: Latino Older Adults

- As the social work profession advances into the 21st century, little is known about substance abuse among Latino older adults. A review of the literature in social work and related fields revealed only one article focusing on the topic of substance among Latino older adults..... Clearly, a need exists for further research on substance abuse among this group, research that can lay the groundwork for the development of specialized identification and treatment interventions.

# 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

Does Personality Phenotype (16 characteristics) mitigate epigenetic markers for depressive symptomology in Progeny of individuals with intergenerational depression?

# 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) Explanation,
- (6) 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 (social work-related?)
- 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.

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

- % of your study population, the impact of the 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.