

Chapter 4

Problem Formulation

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Overview

- 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.