



empowerment series

9e

Research Methods FOR SOCIAL WORK

Allen Rubin Earl R. Babbie

Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards by Chapter

The Council on Social Work Education’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards requires all social work students to develop nine competencies and recommends teaching and assessing 31 related component behaviors, listed as Educational Policy (EP) Competencies 1–9 below. The multicolor icons (see figure at right) and end of chapter “Competency Notes” connect these important standards to class work in the chapters identified below with **bold blue type**.



The 9 Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015)	Chapter(s) Where Referenced
Competency 1—Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior:	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 11
a. Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW Code of Ethics, relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision-making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12
b. Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations	
c. Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication	
d. Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes	5
e. Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior	
Competency 2—Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice:	2, 6
a. Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels	2, 6
b. Present themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences	
c. Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies	
Competency 3—Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice:	3, 18, 19
a. Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels	3, 18, 19
b. Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice	3, 18, 19
Competency 4—Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-informed Practice:	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
a. Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research	1, 2
b. Apply critical thinking to engage in analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
c. Use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
Competency 5—Engage in Policy Practice:	2, 4, 11, 12, 14
a. Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services	
b. Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services	
c. Apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice	

The 9 Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015)	Chapter(s) Where Referenced
Competency 6—Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:	
a. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to engage with clients and constituencies	
b. Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and constituencies	
Competency 7—Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:	2, 8, 9, 10, 19
a. Collect and organize data, and apply critical thinking to interpret information from clients and constituencies	2, 8, 9, 10, 19
b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and constituencies	2, 21, 22
c. Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within clients and constituencies	2
d. Select appropriate intervention strategies based on the assessment, research knowledge, and values and preferences of clients and constituencies	2, 8, 9, 10, 19
Competency 8—Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:	2, 4
a. Critically choose and implement interventions to achieve practice goals and enhance capacities of clients and constituencies	2, 4
b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies	
c. Use inter-professional collaboration as appropriate to achieve beneficial practice outcomes	
d. Negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of diverse clients and constituencies	
e. Facilitate effective transitions and endings that advance mutually agreed-on goals	
Competency 9—Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23
a. Select and use appropriate methods for evaluation of outcomes	2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23
b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the evaluation of outcomes	2, 3, 6
c. Critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate intervention and program processes and outcomes	2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22, 23
d. Apply evaluation findings to improve practice effectiveness at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels	1, 2, 23

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RESEARCH METHODS FOR SOCIAL WORK

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To our wives
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PREFACE

As with previous editions of this text, this ninth edition contains significant improvements to keep up with advances in the field and respond to the excellent suggestions from colleagues. One of the things that hasn't changed is our presentation of boxes to illustrate concepts that bring research content to life and illustrate its relevance to social work and its utility in informing social work practice. In that connection, we have added some new boxes in this edition. Here are some of our other most noteworthy changes to this edition.

CSWE EPAS Core Competencies. As we were writing this new edition, the Council on Social Work Education was in the process of revising its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) Core Competencies. Accordingly, we have changed the way we show how the contents of our book pertain to those core competencies.

Book Length. In response to reviewer concerns about the length and cost of the book, we strived to shorten this edition in ways that will not sacrifice one of its chief virtues: its comprehensiveness and use of many social work practice examples and illustrations. Although the shortening revisions occurred in many chapters, they are most noteworthy in the content on inferential statistics, in which two chapters were shortened and combined into one (Chapter 22).

Significant Additions. At the same time, we made many additions throughout the book. The most significant additions are as follows:

- Expanded coverage of mixed-methods
 - New content on LGBTQ populations in several chapters
 - Expanded content on scale development
 - New content on criteria for inferring causality in epidemiological research
 - More emphasis on how to conduct successful program evaluations
- New, updated content on how advances in technology are affecting surveys and qualitative research
 - New content on how to conduct focus group interviewing
 - A new Appendix on critically appraising meta-analyses

Below is a chapter-by-chapter description of our most noteworthy changes.

- **Chapter 1.** Several reviewers offered useful recommendations regarding the need to shorten this lengthy chapter. We agreed with and followed their advice. At the same time, however, we managed to add a humorous photo and a new box listing some interventions with strong research support.
- **Chapter 2.** Throughout our discussion of evidence-based practice (EBP), we have increased content showing how EBP applies to the macro and policy levels of social work practice. Also throughout we have replaced wording about EBP *guiding* practice with wording about EBP *informing* practice decisions. We replaced the model of EBP in Figure 2-1 with an updated version of the model. We elaborated our discussion of systematic reviews and meta-analyses and added Figure 2-2 on criteria for critically appraising them. We also updated our box on Google Scholar results.
- **Chapter 3.** In response to suggestions from our reviewers and other colleagues, extensive changes were made to this chapter in an effort to make it less overwhelming and more relevant to social work students. In particular, we have shortened the coverage of philosophical issues, made it less esoteric, and modified it so that instead of dwelling on paradigm wars it puts more emphasis on the flexible use of each paradigm, depending on the research question and study purpose.

In keeping with this new emphasis, we have renamed the chapter, replacing philosophy and theory in the title with “Factors Influencing the Research Process.” The philosophical content no longer appears at the beginning of the chapter. Instead, the chapter starts by covering the phases of the research process, moving coverage of philosophical issues from the end of Chapter 4 in the previous edition to the start of Chapter 3 in this one. The previous figure diagramming the research process has been replaced with one that is less cluttered and complex—one that we think students will find more relevant and easier to follow. One of the suggestions we have received from colleagues is to add more LGBTQ content to various parts of the book. In that connection, we have altered the way we cover sex and gender variables in this chapter.

- **Chapter 4.** We have received enthusiastic praise for this chapter from various colleagues, who have added that they’d like to see the content on mixed-methods expanded a bit. So, we have expanded our discussion of mixed-methods, including coverage of additional types of mixed methods designs and a new box providing a case example of a published mixed-methods study of clients and practitioners in a child welfare agency.
- **Chapter 5.** We added content on getting informed consent to videorecord, elaborated on IRB debriefing requirements when deception is involved in the research, added content on federal regulations regarding vulnerable populations, and modified our section on bias and insensitivity to better distinguish the concepts of sex and gender identity and thus make the section more appropriate regarding LGBTQ people. Also bolstering the chapter’s attention to research ethics concerning LGBTQ populations, we added a box titled “IRB Imperfections Regarding Research with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations.” In addition to illustrating mistakes that IRB board members can make, that box shows how best to respond to such mistakes to enhance chances for eventual IRB approval. In response to requests from reviewers, we shortened somewhat the very lengthy section on politics, reducing the amount of attention given to objectivity and ideology. We think that now students will be better able
- to comprehend and appreciate the relevance of that section.
- **Chapter 6.** We have added substantial content regarding cultural competence with regard to LGBTQ individuals.
- **Chapter 7.** In response to a reviewer’s request for more content on research question development we’ve added a new box illustrating the process of formulating a good research question. In keeping with our overall effort to shorten this book without losing its essential comprehensiveness, we also have implemented reviewer suggestions to make the coverage of units of analysis less extensive and less detailed. In so doing, we think students will find coverage of that topic more relevant and easier to comprehend.
- **Chapter 8.** We clarified what is meant by truisms. We added a box providing more examples of spurious relationships. We simplified somewhat our discussion of conceptions and reality and clarified that the consequences of abstract constructs are real. In response to suggestions from colleagues, we have moved up the section on levels of measurement from Chapter 21 to this chapter. Content on the implications of levels of measurement for statistical analysis remains in Chapter 21.
- **Chapter 9.** We added a brief explanation of the term *correlation* to the section on interrater reliability and a new box to further illustrate the difference between reliability and validity.
- **Chapter 10.** We significantly expanded our discussion of scale development, including a large new section on generating an initial pool of items and how to select items from that pool. We also expanded somewhat our discussion of double-barreled items, partly to enhance reader understanding of some of the nuances involved and partly to compensate for the removal of the outdated box on the subject. In response to reviewer suggestions, and also to try to reduce the length and cost of this edition, we replaced one 3-page long and somewhat outdated figure of a composite illustration with a much shorter (one-half page) figure and replaced the 4.5 page figure displaying excerpts from a lengthy standardized open-ended interview schedule with a brief summary of that schedule and a reproduction of just one item from it.

- **Chapter 11.** We significantly expanded our discussion of criteria for inferring causality, especially in regard to additional criteria used in epidemiological research, such as strength of correlation, plausibility and coherence, and consistency in replication. We also added some comments about ethics and IRB approval in regard to control groups.
- **Chapter 12.** Our colleagues expressed praise for this chapter and had only a few minor suggestions for tweaking it. One found the brief box near the beginning of the chapter to be unnecessary. We agreed and deleted it in keeping with our effort to reduce the length and cost of the book.
- **Chapter 13.** With each new edition of this book we receive consistently positive feedback about this chapter. We found little need to update or otherwise modify this chapter, with one exception. One of our reviewers pointed out the need to address the implications of disagreements among triangulated data gatherers. So we added that for this edition.
- **Chapter 14.** This was one of our more extensively revised chapters. The revisions were primarily in the organization and tone of the chapter, although some new content was added, as well. While keeping most of the previous content on the politics of program evaluation and the difficulties that can pose for evaluators, we wanted to improve the chapter's emphasis on how to conduct successful evaluations. In that connection, we moved most of the politics content toward the back of the chapter, clarified that it pertains mainly to outcome evaluations, and moved other sections closer to the front. Logic models, for example, previously appeared in the penultimate section of the chapter and now appear early in it, right after a moved-up section on planning an evaluation. We also updated and shortened our coverage of the impact of managed care. A section on evidence-based practice was added to our historical overview. It introduces readers to the utility of meta-analyses and effect-size statistics—concepts covered more comprehensively in later chapters. We also expanded our discussion of summative and formative evaluations.
- **Chapter 15.** Our colleagues appear to be relatively pleased with this chapter. We implemented several minor tweaks that they suggested as well as a request by some for a more substantial revision: a shortened and less complex discussion of multistage cluster sampling.
- **Chapter 16.** This chapter received extensive revisions to try to keep pace with new technological advances affecting telephone and online surveys. We also refer readers to sources for keeping abreast of these developments. Four new sections were added regarding: (1) the implications of these advances for telephone surveys; (2) instrument design for online surveys; (3) improving response rates in online surveys; and (4) mixed-mode surveys combining online, telephone, and postal mail methods.
- **Chapter 17.** This is another chapter with new content regarding the ways in which our online world is affecting research. The main change is the addition of a section on online unobtrusive research, which includes examples of studies that monitor social media posts to identify words and phrases that are predictive of actual suicide attempts and other self-harm behaviors.
- **Chapter 18.** Various tweaks were made in this chapter, as suggested by reviewers; however, there were no major additions to it.
- **Chapter 19.** The main revisions to this chapter were as follows: (1) the addition of a section on the types and sequencing of focus group questions, and (2) a new box summarizing a focus group study—published in the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*—that assessed the psychosocial needs of lesbian and gay elders in long-term care.
- **Chapter 20.** The main revision in this chapter was an expansion of content on open coding.
- **Chapter 21.** We made many significant changes to our chapters on quantitative data analysis in an effort to shorten and simplify this content in ways that better fit how most instructors handle it in their courses. In this chapter, for example, we removed most of the content on levels of measurement in line with requests to move

that content up to Chapter 8 (see above). What's left is the content on the implications of those levels for the kinds of descriptive statistics that are appropriate to calculate. As part of our effort to collapse our two inferential data analyses chapters into one chapter and reduce the overall length and complexity of the inferential content, we moved the coverage of measures of association from Chapter 22 into this chapter. We also expanded our coverage of table construction and replaced several tables with ones focusing on illustrations of more direct relevance to social work.

- **Chapter 22.** In keeping with our effort to improve the fit between our coverage of inferential data analysis and how that content is covered in most research methods courses, we removed the content that is much more likely to be covered in statistics courses. In so doing, we were able to collapse and combine our previous two chapters on this content into one chapter. As mentioned above, we moved most of the coverage of measures of association up into Chapter 21, retaining in this chapter only the part dealing with the interpretation of relationship strength. We moved the coverage of statistical power analysis up from Chapter 23 into this chapter. We cut most of the content on tests of significance and moved it up into this chapter, as well, although we added a box that identifies the purpose of some significance tests commonly used in outcome studies relevant to evidence-based practice. Also moved up is our coverage of meta-analyses. We took the content on how to critically appraise meta-analyses out of this chapter and put an expanded version of that content in a new Appendix.
- **Chapter 23.** In this chapter (which used to be Chapter 24), we have added a section comparing large-scale and small-scale RFPs and proposals, including a new box illustrating a small-scale RFP aimed at students who want to conduct research on LGBT family issues.
- **Appendix A.** We've updated the appendix on using the library to make it more consistent with today's online world.

- **Appendix B.** We updated the discussion of selecting random numbers in regard to generating random numbers online.
- **Appendix C.** This new appendix contains expanded coverage on critically appraising meta-analyses.

» ANCILLARY PACKAGE

MindTap

Research Methods for Social Work comes with MindTap, an online learning solution created to harness the power of technology to drive student success. This cloud-based platform integrates a number of learning applications (“apps”) into an easy-to-use and easy to access tool that supports a personalized learning experience. MindTap combines student learning tools-readings, multimedia, activities and assessments into a singular Learning Path that guides students through the course. This MindTap includes:

- Entire electronic text
- Additional readings to further explore chapter topics
- Case Studies
- Video Examples
- Quizzing
- Flashcards

Online Instructor's Manual

The Instructor's Manual (IM) contains a variety of resources to aid instructors in preparing and presenting text material in a manner that meets their personal preferences and course needs. It presents chapter-by-chapter suggestions and resources to enhance and facilitate learning.

Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero

Cognero is a flexible, online system that allows you to author, edit, and manage test bank content as well as create multiple test versions in an instant.

You can deliver tests from your school's learning management system, your classroom, or wherever you want.

Online PowerPoint

These vibrant Microsoft® PowerPoint® lecture slides for each chapter assist you with your lecture by providing concept coverage using images, figures, and tables directly from the textbook.

Social Work CourseMate Website for Research Methods for Social Work

Accessible at <http://www.cengagebrain.com>, the text-specific CourseMate website offers chapter-by-chapter online quizzes, chapter outlines, crossword puzzles, flash cards (from the text's glossary), review questions, and exercises (from the ends of chapters in the text) that provide students with an opportunity to apply concepts presented in the text. Students can go to the Companion Site to access a primer for SPSS 17.0.

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An Introduction to Scientific Inquiry in Social Work

- 1 Why Study Research?
- 2 Evidence-Based Practice
- 3 Factors Influencing the Research Process
- 4 Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods of Inquiry

Science is a word everyone uses. Yet people's images of science vary greatly. For some, science is mathematics; for others, science is white coats and laboratories. The word is often confused with *technology* or equated with challenging high school or college courses.

If you tell strangers that you are taking a course dealing with scientific inquiry and ask them to guess what department it's in, they are a lot more likely to guess something like biology or physics than social work. In fact, many social workers themselves often underestimate the important role that scientific inquiry can play in social work practice. But this is changing. More and more, social workers are learning how taking a scientific approach can enhance their practice effectiveness.

Although scholars can debate philosophical issues in science, for the purposes of this book we will look at it as a method of inquiry—that is, a way of learning and knowing things that can guide the decisions made in social work practice. When contrasted with other ways that social work practitioners can learn and know things, scientific inquiry has some special characteristics—most notably, a search for evidence.

In this opening set of chapters, we'll examine the nature of scientific inquiry and its relevance for social work. We'll explore the fundamental characteristics and issues that make scientific inquiry different from other ways of knowing things in social work.

In Chapter 1, we'll examine the value of scientific inquiry in social work practice and how it helps safeguard against some of the risks inherent in alternative sources of practice knowledge.

Chapter 2 will delve into evidence-based practice—a model of social work practice that emphasizes the use of the scientific method and scientific evidence in making practice decisions.

Chapter 3 will examine the research process in social work and various factors that can influence the way that process is carried out. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of and compare the three contrasting yet complementary overarching models of social work research: one that uses quantitative methods to produce precise and generalizable statistical findings; one that uses more flexible, qualitative methods to delve into deeper understandings of phenomena not easily reduced to numbers; and one that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches within the same study.



1

Why Study Research?

- » INTRODUCTION
- » THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD
- » OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING
- » RECOGNIZING FLAWS IN UNSCIENTIFIC SOURCES OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE KNOWLEDGE
- » THE UTILITY OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY IN SOCIAL WORK
- » REVIEWS OF SOCIAL WORK EFFECTIVENESS
- » THE NEED TO CRITIQUE RESEARCH QUALITY
- » COMPASSION AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS
- » UTILITY OF RESEARCH IN APPLIED SOCIAL WORK SETTINGS
- » MAIN POINTS
- » REVIEW QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES
- » INTERNET EXERCISES

EPAS Competencies for This Chapter

Competency 1 Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior: You will learn why studying research is part of preparing to be ethical and professional in your social work practice.

Competency 4 Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice: As a research text that emphasizes practice applications, all of its chapters address aspects of this competency.

Competency 9 Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities: You will learn why studying research is an essential part of evaluating practice.

What You'll Learn in This Chapter

You may be wondering why social work students are required to take a research course. We'll begin to answer that question in this chapter. We'll examine the way social workers learn things and the mistakes they make along the way. We'll also examine what makes scientific inquiry different from other ways of knowing things and its utility in social work practice. We will preface this and the remaining chapters of this book by listing the competencies relevant to each chapter that students are expected to develop according to the Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Each competency will be accompanied by a brief statement on its relevance to the chapter.

» INTRODUCTION

Social workers—like doctors, lawyers, nurses, or any other type of professional—need to know things that will make their professional practice effective. Although it seems reasonable to suppose that all social workers would agree with that statement, they would not all agree about the *best* ways to go about learning the things they need to know. Some might favor learning things by relying on what most of their teachers, supervisors, and more experienced social workers in general agree to be true. Others might assert that learning things through what they observe and experience in their professional practice is at least as valuable as is learning about what other respected sources agree to be true.

Both of these two ways of knowing things have value not only in guiding social work practice but also in guiding decisions throughout our personal lives. As we grow up, we must rely on what the people we respect tell us to keep us safe and healthy. We shouldn't and don't have to experience the harmful or painful effects of doing unsafe or unhealthy things before we learn not to do them. At the same time, we learn other things through our direct experience and observation.

The two ways of knowing things that we've been discussing are termed *agreement reality* and *experiential reality*. Although each is invaluable in guiding our personal and professional behavior, let's now look at how relying on them exclusively can be risky.

Agreement Reality

Most of what we know is a matter of agreement and belief. Little of it is based on personal experience and discovery. A big part of growing up in any society, in fact, is the process of learning to accept what everybody around you “knows” is so.

You know that it's cold on the planet Mars. How do you know? Unless you've been to Mars lately, you know it's cold there because somebody told you and you believed what you were told. Perhaps your physics or astronomy instructor told you it was cold on Mars, or maybe you read about it somewhere.

However, relying exclusively on agreement reality can be risky because some of the things that

everyone agrees on are wrong. For example, at one time everyone “knew” that the world is flat. Throughout the history of the social work profession, there have been things that most social workers and other mental health professionals agreed on that were not only wrong but also harmful.

In the mid-20th century, for example, there was widespread agreement that the main cause of schizophrenia was faulty parenting or other dysfunctional family dynamics. Having what was called a *schizophrenogenic mother* was widely seen as a main reason why a child—perhaps later as an adult—eventually came to have schizophrenia. Such mothers were portrayed as cold, domineering, and overprotective in ways that did not permit their children to develop individual identities. No compelling research evidence supported these concepts, but they were nonetheless widely accepted by mental health practitioners. As a result, social workers and other mental health professionals often dealt with the family as a cause of the problem rather than develop a treatment alliance with the family. Many parents consequently reported feelings of self-recrimination for the illnesses of their offspring. As you can imagine, this was painful for many parents.

Scientific research studies during the 1970s and 1980s debunked the notion that schizophrenia is caused by schizophrenogenic mothers or other dysfunctional family dynamics. Some studies uncovered the biological basis of schizophrenia. Other studies showed how practitioners who were guided by the notion of faulty parenting (or other dysfunctional family dynamics) when treating people with schizophrenia and their families were actually increasing the risk of relapse and unnecessarily exacerbating the burden that such families had to bear when caring for their sick relative (Rubin & Bowker, 1986).

Another example of ineffective or harmful professional practices that were guided by agreement reality includes “Scared Straight” programs. These programs were once popular as an effective way to prevent future violations of the law by juveniles. It was thought that by visiting prisons and interacting with adult inmates, juveniles would be so frightened that their fear would deter them from future criminal behavior. But various scientific research studies found that Scared Straight programs not only were ineffective but actually increased the risk of delinquency (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Buehler, 2002).

Experiential Reality

In contrast to knowing things through agreement, we can also know things through direct experience and observation. However, just as relying exclusively on agreement reality can be risky, so can relying exclusively on experiential reality. That's because some of the things that we experience are influenced by our predilections that are based on agreements that may or may not be accurate.

Let's take an example. Imagine you're at a party. It's a high-class affair, and the drinks and food are excellent. You are particularly taken by one type of appetizer the host brings around on a tray. It's breaded, deep-fried, and especially tasty. You have a couple, and they are delicious! You have more. Soon you are subtly moving around the room to be wherever the host arrives with a tray of these nibbles.

Finally, you can't contain yourself any more. "What are they?" you ask. "How can I get the recipe?" The host lets you in on the secret: "You've been eating breaded, deep-fried worms!" Your response is dramatic: Your stomach rebels, and you promptly throw up all over the living room rug. Awful! What a terrible thing to serve guests!

The point of the story is that both feelings about the appetizer would be real. Your initial liking for them, based on your own direct experience, was certainly real, but so was the feeling of disgust you had when you found out that you'd been eating worms. It should be evident, however, that the feeling of disgust was strictly a product of the agreements you have with those around you that worms aren't fit to eat. That's an agreement you began the first time your parents found you sitting in a pile of dirt with half a wriggling worm dangling from your lips. When they pried your mouth open and reached down your throat to find the other half of the worm, you learned that worms are not acceptable food in our society.

Aside from the agreements we have, what's wrong with worms? They're probably high in protein and low in calories. Bite sized and easily packaged, they're a distributor's dream. They are also a delicacy for some people who live in societies that lack our agreement that worms are disgusting. Other people might love the worms but be turned off by the deep-fried bread-crust.

Analogies to this worm example have abounded in the history social work practice (as well as in the

practice of other helping professions). Decades ago, for example, practitioners who believed in the schizophrenogenic mother concept were likely to be predisposed to look for, perceive, and interpret maternal behaviors in ways that fit their agreement reality. We have known clinical practitioners who will look for and perceive even fairly inconsequential client behaviors as evidence that their favored treatment approach is being effective while overlooking other behaviors that might raise doubt about their effectiveness. Later in this chapter, we'll discuss this phenomenon in terms of the concept of selective observation, which is one common way in which our agreement reality influences our experiential reality.

Reality, then, is a tricky business. Although when we start out in life or in our professional careers, we must inescapably rely heavily on agreement reality and experiential reality as starting points for "knowing" things, some of the things you "know" may not be true. But how can you really know what's real? People have grappled with that question for thousands of years. Science is one of the strategies that have arisen from that grappling.

» THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Science offers an approach to both agreement reality and experiential reality. That approach is called the **scientific method***. When social workers question things and search for evidence as the basis for making practice decisions, they are applying the scientific method. Let's now examine the key features of the scientific method, beginning with a principle that requires keeping an open mind.

All Knowledge Is Tentative and Open to Question

In our quest to understand things, we should strive to keep an *open mind* about everything that we think we know or that we want to believe. In other words, we should consider the things we call "knowledge" to be *tentative* and *subject to refutation*. This feature has no exceptions. No matter how long a particular tradition has been practiced, no

*Words in boldface are defined in the glossary at the end of the book.



Earl Babbie

We learn some things by experience, others by agreement. This young man seems to be into personal experience.

matter how much power or esteem a particular authority figure may have, no matter how noble a cause may be, no matter how cherished it may be, we can question any belief.

Keeping an open mind is not always easy. Few of us enjoy facts that get in the way of our cherished beliefs. When we think about allowing everything to be open to question, we may think of old-fashioned notions that we ourselves have disputed and thus pat ourselves on the back for being so open-minded. If we have a liberal bent, for example, we may fancy ourselves as scientific for questioning stereotypes of gender roles, laws banning gay marriage, or papal decrees about abortion. But are we also prepared to have an open mind about our own cherished beliefs—to allow them to be questioned and refuted? Only when a belief you cherish is questioned do you face the tougher test of your commitment to scientific notions of the provisional nature of knowledge and keeping everything open to question and refutation.

Replication

However, it is not only our beliefs that are open to question; also tentative and open to question are the findings of scientific studies. Because there are no foolproof ways to guarantee that evidence produced by scientific studies is purely objective, accurate, and generalizable, the scientific method also calls for the replication of studies. *Replication* means duplicating a study to see if the same evidence and conclusions are produced. It also refers to modified replications in which the procedures are changed in certain ways that improve on previous studies or determine if findings hold up with different target populations or under different circumstances.

Observation

Another key feature of the scientific method is the search for *evidence based on observation* as the basis for knowledge. The term *empirical* refers to this valuing of observation-based evidence. As we

will see later, one can be empirical in different ways, depending on the nature of the evidence and the way we search for and observe it. For now, remember that the scientific method seeks truth through observed evidence—not through authority, tradition, or ideology—no matter how much social pressure may be connected to particular beliefs and no matter how many people cherish those beliefs or how long they’ve been proclaimed to be true. It took courage long ago to question fiercely held beliefs that the Earth is flat. Scientifically minded social workers today should find the same courage to inquire as to the observation-based evidence that supports interventions or policies that they are told or taught to believe in.

Social workers should also examine the nature of that evidence. To be truly scientific, the observations that accumulated the evidence should have been *systematic* and *comprehensive*. To avoid overgeneralization and selective observation (errors we will be discussing shortly), the *sample* of observations should have been *large* and *diverse*.

Objectivity

The specified procedures also should be scrutinized for potential bias. The scientific method recognizes that we all have predilections and biases that can distort how we look for or perceive evidence. It therefore emphasizes the *pursuit of objectivity* in the way we seek and observe evidence. None of us may ever be purely objective, no matter how strongly committed we are to the scientific method. No matter how scientifically pristine their research may be, researchers want to discover something important—that is, to have findings that will make a significant contribution to improving human well-being or (less nobly) enhancing their professional stature. The scientific method does not require that researchers deceive themselves into thinking they lack these biases. Instead, recognizing that they may have these biases, they must find ways to gather observations that are not influenced by their own biases.

Suppose, for example, you devise a new intervention for improving the self-esteem of traumatized children. Naturally, you will be biased in wanting to observe improvements in the self-esteem of the children receiving your intervention. It’s okay to have that bias and still scientifically inquire whether your intervention really does

improve self-esteem. You would not want to base your inquiry solely on your own subjective clinical impressions. That approach would engender a great deal of skepticism about the objectivity of your judgments that the children’s self-esteem improved. Thus, instead of relying exclusively on your clinical impressions, you would devise an observation procedure that was not influenced by your own biases. Perhaps you would ask colleagues who didn’t know about your intervention or the nature of your inquiry to interview the children and rate their self-esteem. Or perhaps you would administer an existing paper-and-pencil test of self-esteem that social scientists regard as valid. Although neither alternative can guarantee complete objectivity, each would be more scientific in reflecting your effort to pursue objectivity.

Transparency

Finally, the scientific method requires transparency by researchers in reporting the details of how their studies have been conducted. All *procedural details should be specified* so that others can see the basis for the conclusions that were reached, assess whether overgeneralization and selective observation were truly avoided, and judge whether the conclusions are indeed warranted in light of the evidence and the ways in which it was observed.

The box “Key Features of the Scientific Method” summarizes these features and provides a handy mnemonic for remembering them.

» OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING

The scientific method is not the only way to learn about the world. As we mentioned earlier, for example, we all discover things through our personal experiences from birth on and from the agreed-on knowledge that others give us. Sometimes this knowledge can profoundly influence our lives, such as when we learn that getting an education will affect how much money we earn later in life or how much job satisfaction we’ll eventually experience. As students, we learn that studying hard will result in better examination grades.

We also learn that such patterns of cause and effect are probabilistic in nature: The effects occur more often when the causes occur than when they are absent—but not always. Thus, students learn

KEY FEATURES OF THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

A mnemonic for remembering some of the key features of the scientific method is the word *trout*. Think of catching or eating a delicious trout,¹ and it will help you remember the following key features:

- T Tentative:** Everything we think we know today is open to question and subject to reassessment, modification, or refutation.
- R Replication:** Even the best studies are open to question and need to be replicated.
- O Observation:** Knowledge is grounded in orderly and comprehensive observations.
- U Unbiased:** Observations should be unbiased.
- T Transparency:** All procedural details are openly specified for review and evaluation and to show the basis of conclusions that were reached.

¹If you are a vegetarian, you might want to just picture how beautiful these fish are and imagine how many of their lives you are saving.

that studying hard produces good grades in most instances but not every time. Social workers learn that being abused as children makes people more likely to become abusive parents later on, but not all parents who were abused as children become abusive themselves. They also learn that severe mental illness makes one vulnerable to becoming homeless, but not all adults with severe mental illnesses become homeless.

We will return to these concepts of causality and probability throughout the book. As we'll see, scientific inquiry makes them more explicit and provides techniques for dealing with them more rigorously than do other ways of learning about the world.

Tradition

One important secondhand way to attempt to learn things is through tradition. We may test a few of these “truths” on our own, but we simply accept the great majority of them. These are the things that “everybody knows.” Tradition, in this sense of the term, has clear advantages for human inquiry. By accepting what everybody knows, you are spared the overwhelming task of starting from scratch in your search for regularities and understanding. Knowledge is cumulative, and an inherited body of information and understanding is the jumping-off point for the development of more knowledge. We often speak of “standing on the shoulders of giants”—that is, on the shoulders of previous generations.

At the same time, tradition may be detrimental to human inquiry. If you seek a fresh and different understanding of something that everybody already understands and has always understood, you may be seen as a fool. More to the point, it will probably never occur to you to seek a different understanding of something that is already understood and obvious.

When you enter your first job as a professional social worker, you may learn about your agency's preferred intervention approaches. (If you have begun the field placement component of your professional education, you may have already experienced this phenomenon.) Chances are you will feel good about receiving instructions about “how we do things in this agency.” You might be anxious about beginning to work with real cases and might be relieved that you won't have to choose between competing theories to guide what you do with clients. In conforming to agency traditions, you might feel that you have a head start, benefiting from the accumulated practice wisdom of previous generations of practitioners in your new work setting. Indeed you do. After all, how many recently graduated social workers are in a better position than experienced agency staff to determine the best intervention approaches in their agency?

But the downside of conforming to traditional practice wisdom is that you can become too comfortable doing it. You may never think to look for evidence that the traditional approaches are or

are not as effective as everyone believes or for evidence concerning whether alternative approaches are more effective. And if you do seek and find such evidence, you may find that agency traditions make your colleagues unreceptive to the new information.

Authority

Despite the power of tradition, new knowledge appears every day. Aside from your personal inquiries, throughout your life you will benefit from others' new discoveries and understandings. Often, acceptance of these new acquisitions will depend on the status of the discoverer. For example, you're more likely to believe the epidemiologist who declares that the common cold can be transmitted through kissing than to believe a layperson who says the same thing.

Like tradition, authority can both assist and hinder human inquiry. Inquiry is hindered when we depend on the authority of experts speaking outside their realm of expertise. The advertising industry plays heavily on this misuse of authority by having popular athletes discuss the nutritional value of breakfast cereals or movie actors evaluate the performance of automobiles, among similar tactics. It is better to trust the judgment of the person who has special training, expertise, and credentials in the matter, especially in the face of contradictory positions on a given question. At the same time, inquiry can be greatly hindered by the legitimate authority who errs within his or her own special province. Biologists, after all, can and do make mistakes in the field of biology. Biological knowledge changes over time. So does social work knowledge, as discussed earlier regarding debunked notions about the cause and treatment of schizophrenia.

Our point is that knowledge accepted on the authority of legitimate and highly regarded experts can be incorrect and perhaps harmful. It is therefore important that social work practitioners be open to new discoveries that might challenge the cherished beliefs of their respected supervisors or favorite theorists.

Also keep an open mind about the new knowledge that displaces the old. It, too, may be flawed, no matter how prestigious its founders. Who knows? Perhaps someday we'll even find evidence that currently out-of-favor ideas about parental causation of schizophrenia had merit after all.

That prospect might seem highly unlikely now given current evidence, but in taking a scientific approach to knowledge, we try to remain objective and open to new discoveries, no matter how much they may conflict with the traditional wisdom or current authorities. Although complete objectivity may be an impossible ideal to attain, we try not to close our minds to new ideas that might conflict with tradition and authority.

Both tradition and authority, then, are two-edged swords in the search for knowledge about the world. They provide us with a starting point for our own inquiry. But they may also lead us to start at the wrong point or push us in the wrong direction.

Common Sense

The notion of *common sense* is often cited as another way to know about the world. Common sense can imply logical reasoning, such as when we reason that it makes no sense to think that rainbows cause rainfall since rainbows appear only after the rain starts falling and only when the sun shines during the storm. Common sense can also imply widely shared beliefs based on tradition and authority. The problem with this sort of common sense is that what "everyone knows" can be wrong. Long ago, everyone "knew" that the Earth was flat. It was just plain common sense since you could see no curvature to the Earth's surface and since hell was below the surface. At one point in our history, a great many people thought that slavery made common sense. Many people think that laws against gays and lesbians marrying or adopting children make common sense. Most social workers think such laws make no common sense whatsoever. Although common sense might seem rational and accurate, it is an insufficient and highly risky alternative to science as a source of knowledge.

Popular Media

Much of what we know about the world is learned from the news media. We first learned about the September 11, 2001, attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center from watching coverage of that tragic event on television and reading about it in newspapers and magazines and on the Internet. The same sources informed us of the victims and heroes in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. They provided information on

the perpetrators of the attack and a great many related issues and events. We did not have to conduct a scientific study to know about the attack or have strong feelings about it. Neither did we need tradition or authority. We did not have to experience the attack firsthand (although we really did experience it—and probably were at least somewhat traumatized—by what we saw and heard on our television sets).

Although we can learn a lot from the popular media, we can also be misled by them. Witness, for example, disagreements between some cable news networks as to which network is really more trustworthy, fair, and balanced. Although most journalists might strive for accuracy and objectivity, they are still influenced by their own political biases—some more than others. Some also might seek out the most sensational aspects of events and then report them in a biased manner to garner reader interest or appeal to their prejudices (ratings affect profits!).

Even when journalists strive for accuracy in their reportage, the nature of their business can impede their efforts. For example, they have deadlines to meet and word limits as to how much they can write. Thus, when covering testimony at city hall by neighborhood residents, some of whom support a proposed new economic development plan in their neighborhood and some of whom oppose it, their coverage might be dominated not by folks like the majority of residents, who may not be outspoken. Instead, they might unintentionally rely on the least representative but most outspoken and demonstrative supporters or opponents of the proposed development.

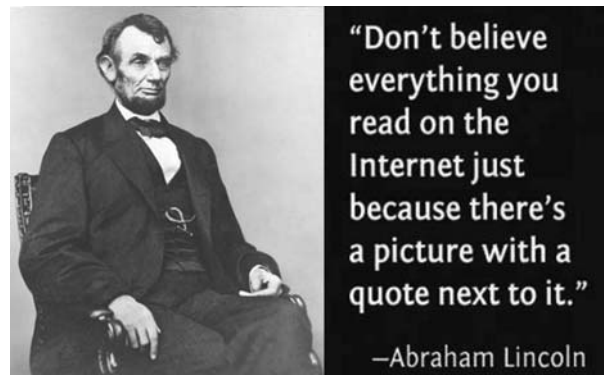
Then there are journalists whose jobs are to deliver editorials and opinion pieces, not to report stories factually. What we learn from them is colored by their predilections. The intent of such writing is not to provide a balanced approach but to persuade readers to share their position on the issues.

The popular media also include fictional movies and television shows that can influence what we think we know about the world. Some fictional accounts of history are indeed educational, perhaps informing us about African Americans who fought for the Union during the Civil War or sensitizing us to the horrors of the Holocaust or of slavery. Others, however, can be misleading, such as when most mentally ill people are portrayed as violent or

when most welfare recipients are portrayed as African Americans.

More and more these days, many folks get much of their information from the Internet. Despite the wonders of the Internet and the immediate availability of a tremendous array of useful information therein, information available on unscientific sites is not risk free. Perhaps most noteworthy in this regard is the Wikipedia website. Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. A humorous illustration of the risks inherent in allowing anyone to edit the information available at that site was reported by Eve Fairbanks (2008, p. 5). In February 2008, during the heat of the battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, somebody accessed Clinton's Wikipedia page and replaced her photo with a picture of a walrus. Perhaps in retaliation, the next month, a Clinton supporter altered Obama's bio so that it called him "a Kenyan-American politician." Also that month, somebody replaced Clinton's whole page with "It has been reported that Hillary Rodham Clinton has contracted genital herpes due to sexual intercourse with an orangutan."

Obviously, the above Wikipedia example is extreme, and unless its readers despised Clinton or were imbibing something peculiar when accessing the above website, they would not believe that the walrus was really Clinton or that she had intercourse with an orangutan. But it does illustrate that despite the tremendous value of the Internet and the fact that we can learn many valuable things from popular media, they do not provide an adequate alternative to scientific sources of knowledge.



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