

ScWk 240
Week 2
September 5, 2008

Student reports:

1. Address two questions from study guide for Gambrill article
2. What are the characteristics of a good topic for social work research?
3. What are some differences between exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory types of studies?
4. What are the components of a research hypothesis and the difference between “research question” and “hypothesis”?

I. Evidence-Based Practice (EBP)

A. What do we mean when we say “*empirical*”? Relying or based on observation rather than on theory, opinion, or guessing.

B. Study guide questions:

- What is an “evidence-based practice”?
- Check out <http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/search/topical-area/9> for EBP examples related to parental substance abuse
 - What do you think of the rating scale used to categorize these interventions?
- In the author’s view, what should be the role of practitioners? Of clients? Of research method?
- On p. 348 there is mention of a “hierarchy of evidence?” What does this mean?
- A social worker conducts group therapy with domestic violence victims justifying it by explaining “my agency has done it for years.” What would the author say about that?
- In a child welfare agency your supervisor assigns you to a committee to decide whether to implement a 10-week parent education group. What are your first tasks?

C. Definition: R,B & L: Using the best scientific evidence available in deciding how to intervene with individuals, families, groups, or communities

1. Most associate “best scientific evidence” as experimental research designs (randomized treatment studies) but there is more acceptance of other types of research designs, especially when the practice is implemented in community settings
2. Examples of evidence-based practices
 - a) SAMHSA’s National Registry of EBP <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/>
 - b) California Child Welfare EBP Clearinghouse <http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/>

D. EBP not just a noun—also a process

II. The Role of Theory in Research

A. Paradigm—a fundamental model or frame of reference that organizes our views about something

B. Of assumptions, values and theories

C. What is “theory” and why do we need it?

1. Definition of theory in the social sciences: “a systematic set of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life or enrich our sense of how people conduct and find meaning in their daily lives.”

2. Purposes of theory in research:

a) Makes explicit any underlying assumptions and values

b) Justifies how or why we think something is true (such as an *hypothesis*) or why one thing can cause another thing to occur or predict its occurrence

**What do you think causes people to behave the way they do? Genetic predisposition? Environmental factors? Psychological temperament?

**Why would you expect that a parent education class would be effective in reducing the likelihood that parent participants would re-abuse their children?

**Why would you expect that social activity would allow elder adults to maintain cognitive functioning?

1. Types of theories relevant to social work research (not an exhaustive list!)

a) Theories of human behavior (developmental theories, stress & coping, etc.)

b) Theories about groups, organizations and communities

c) Political, sociological and economic theories

d) Theories about environment and culture (ecological theory, acculturation theory, feminist/gender role theories, etc.)

e) Program theory (explains how a practice, program or intervention should work based on the objectives of the program and other theories)

2. Example: Relationship of theory to practice and transcultural research in a parent mentoring program

3. **Role of theory in your paper:** you will be required to identify and use a specific theory in your literature review.

D. What is a *variable*? Observable characteristics that vary among individuals

- a) *Attributes*—The characteristics of a *variable* (e.g. the *attributes* of the variable “gender” are “male” and “female,” and in some studies “transgender/other”)
- b) *Independent variable*— variables used to explain, predict or cause another variable. (Hint—“independent” implies that these variables are unaffected by others.)
- c) *Dependent variable*— the variable that is assumed to be affected, caused or predicted by others. (Hint: “dependent” on others.)
- d) *Constant*—a characteristic or factor that does *not* vary among people in a research study

E. Hypothesis— a prediction about how changes in one thing (or *variable*) can explain changes in another thing (or *variable*).

1. Components of an hypothesis

- a) Independent and dependent variables (X and Y, respectively)
- b) An hypothesized relationship between the variables
 - “X causes Y”
 - “As X changes, so does Y”
 - “X and Y are (or are not) related”
 - $Y = f(X)$ --Shorthand: “Variable Y (the dependent variable) is a function of, somehow affected by, or correlated with, variable X (the independent variable)”
- c) Example: “For uninsured adults with substance abuse problems in San Jose, males are more likely than females to be referred to follow up care.”
 - What is the dependent variable? _____ What are its attributes?
 - What is the independent variable? _____ What are its attributes?
 - How would you describe this study in terms of a *research question*?
 - *Another alternative way of saying this hypothesis*: “For uninsured adults with substance abuse problems in San Jose, there is a relationship between gender and referral into follow up care.”
(Note: the attributes of the dependent variable are “referred to follow up care” vs. “not referred to follow up care”)

2. Research Question

- a) Basic structure—it really is a question, ending with a question mark! (Or

rather, ?)

b) Typical ways to ask research questions:

- “What factors influence help seeking by victims of domestic violence?”
- “Is cognitive behavioral therapy effective in reducing anxiety for children placed in foster homes?”
- “What is the shared experience of newly arrived Mexican men in the process of finding employment?”
- “Is there a relationship between the amount of family support and staying drug free after completing a substance abuse treatment program?”

3. Relationship of theory to hypothesis--inductive vs. deductive reasoning:

a) Using **deductive reasoning**, we develop hypotheses based on general theories or principles

Example: stress and coping theory (general principle) proposes that stress exacerbates symptoms of mental illness. A deductive approach would test this—e.g. by observing individual people with mental illness, does the severity of symptoms vary by the level of stress they experience (i.e. does the theory hold?). Forms the basis of a “**nomothetic**” **approach to explanation**—a general principle and a set of variables can be applied across many individuals—we attempt to discover the factors that explain the phenomenon across many individuals. **Generalization** beyond those individuals originally observed is the goal.

b) Using **inductive reasoning**, we develop theory based on observations.

Example: we observe an individual person who has symptoms of mental illness, and they become exacerbated under periods of higher stress. We pose a preliminary theory that the level of stress affects symptoms of mental illness. Forms the basis of the **idiographic approach to explanation**—we attempt to explain a single case (such as a person) fully using as many factors as possible. **Depth of understanding** the individual person is the goal.

F. Major Types of Research: Qualitative vs. Quantitative (oversimplified but instructive)

1. Idiographic (Qual) vs. nomothetic (Quan)
2. Interpretivist (Qual) vs. positivist (Quan)
3. Depth (Qual) vs. generalizability (Quan)
4. Expansiveness (lots of information about one person) (Qual) vs. reductionism (much less information about lots of people) (Quan)

G. Purposes of Research Inquiry

1. Exploratory
2. Descriptive
3. Explanatory

**What do mean by “evaluative research”?

III. Writing Assignment #1—overview

IV. Next week’s class focus:

- A. Ethical issues and research in a Transcultural perspective
- B. Bias and objectivity in social research
- C. Human subjects consideration in social research
- D. The research process
- E. Starting a literature review—library and internet resources
- F. Writing Assignment #1--continued

V. Next week’s student report questions:

- A. Why is it important to protect research subjects? What areas need protecting?
- B. What is the difference between “confidentiality” and “anonymity”?
- C. What is “culturally competent measurement” in research? Relate this to one or more (of the 5) areas of the Transcultural Perspective.
- D. In a research report, why is the literature review important (or, what purposes does it serve)?

VI. Important Concepts & Definitions to Learn (e.g. “Probably on the Test”)

- Attributes of a variable
- Constant (opposite of *variable*)
- Deduction and induction
- Dependent variable
- Empirical
- Evidence-based practice
- Generalizability—the process of extending the findings of research beyond the specific observations and sample of the study (most often used in terms of *generalizing* from the *sample* to the larger *population*)
- Hypotheses
- Idiographic and nomothetic
- Independent variable
- Paradigms (Positivism, Interpretivism, Critical Social Science)
- Quantitative and qualitative research

- Reductionism
- Representativeness
- Research—purposes of ... (Exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research)
- Research questions--characteristics of good ones
- Social work research—unique characteristics
- Theory
- Variables – Independent vs. Dependent Variables
- $Y = f(X)$ --Shorthand for “variable Y (the dependent variable) is a function of, somehow affected by, or correlated with, variable X (the independent variable)”