

Crafting social work research questions and hypotheses

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Empirical vs. Ethical Questions

Empirical Questions:

- Can be answered by real experiences in the real world

Ethical Questions:

- Questions about which people have moral opinions
- May not be answerable in reference to the real world
- Questions of morality are ethical not empirical
- Questions that ask about general moral opinions about a topic and cannot be answered through science

Key Take Aways:

- Empirical questions are distinct from ethical questions
- There are usually a number of ethical questions and a number of empirical questions that could be asked about any single topic
- While social workers may study topics about which people have moral opinions, their job is to gather empirical data that guides action on behalf of clients.

Writing a Good Research Question:

Seven key features of a good research question:

- It is written in the form of a question
- It is clearly written
- It is not a yes/no
- It has more than one plausible answer
- It considers relationships among multiple variables
- It is specific and clear about the concepts it addresses
- It contains a target population

Why is it important for social workers to be focused when creating a good research question?

- A poorly focused research question can lead to the demise of an otherwise well-executed study
- Research questions should address the needs of a **target population**
 - **Target population:** group of people who's needs your study addresses

Quantitative Research Questions:

- Three kinds of questions:
 - Exploratory
 - Looks to understand something.
 - Descriptive
 - Will often ask for percentage, track instances of phenomena, or determine an average.
 - Explanatory
 - Most common studies in academic literature
 - Contain an independent variable and a dependent variable.
 - Ex. What is the relationship between X and Y variables for target population?
- Be specific!
 - In order for the study to stay focused, you must be clear and specific about the concepts you seek to address.

“Watch Words”

- The use of these words may indicate that you need to be more clear about your research topic.
 - Factors, Causes, Effects, Outcomes
 - What specific causes and effects are you interested in exploring?
 - Effective, Effectiveness, Useful, Efficient
 - What is considered “effective” in the context of the topic?
 - Etc., and so forth
 - Always be clear about the exact concepts you are addressing.

Qualitative Research Questions

- Seek to explore or describe phenomena through the understanding of experiences, understandings, and the meanings people maintain surrounding concepts.
 - Idiographic causal explanations
- Quantitative research questions are often more general, as they seek to understand individual perspectives and understandings surrounding the topic. The questions often use keywords like;
 - “Lived experience”
 - “Personal experience”
 - “Understanding”
 - “Meaning”
 - “Stories”
- Qualitative research questions can change over the course of the study. The approach adapts to the responses of the participants.

Feasibility and Importance

- Topics are limitless, but means of study are not, therefore feasibility must be a factor when embarking on a research topic.
 - Do you have access to the groups you seek to study?
 - What might be the considerations of stakeholders/ Will they support your research topic?
 - Will the population you seek to research participate? How will your identity as the researcher affect the process of study?
 - Resources? Do you have the time and money to follow through with research?
- Is your question important?
 - Is it worth the time energy, and resources?
 - Is it relevant to the established scientific literature?
 - Does it have something new to say or uncover?
 - Is it important to the wider social world? Does it further social justice? Does it benefit the study group? Does it benefit the stakeholders who support your research?

Matching Question and Design

- What method fits your research question?
- What type of research design?
 - Surveys.
 - Experiments
 - Interviews
 - Focus groups
 - Historical analysis
 - Content analysis
 - Secondary data analysis
 - Program evaluation
 - Single-subjects
 - Action research.
 - What makes sense for your topic? What is most feasible?

A Word on “Problems” and “Solutions”

How did you understand the concepts outlined in “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning?”

What are “wicked problems” and “tame problems”?

How do we navigate “wicked” problems when doing research? Is it possible to use them to guide our research?