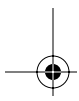# Research Design for Social Work and the Human Services

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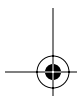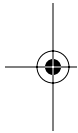
SECOND EDITION

JEANE W. ANASTAS

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Preface to the Second Edition

Since the publication of this book, interest in many of the issues it set out to address has grown substantially. Since it went to press in 1993, there has been an explosion of writing about the uses of qualitative research and evaluation in social work and the helping professions. This literature has indeed been advancing us in our sophistication in both doing and evaluating this kind of inquiry (see, for example, Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Drisko 1997; Gilgun, Daly, & Handel 1992; Morse & Field 1995; Padgett 1998; Reissman 1994; Sherman & Reid 1994). One major reason for the revision of the book is to incorporate this new work into an enriched discussion of flexible method research.

Even case studies, one of the oldest forms of inquiry in the helping professions, have been gaining renewed respect (Gilgun 1994). One way in which the discussion of flexible method research has been enriched in this edition is through the inclusion of an entirely new chapter on traditional case studies (chapter 4). This content parallels in some ways the existing chapter on the application of fixed methods of research to cases in chapter 8 on single-system designs. It may be that in future editions it will be possible to further differentiate among kinds and styles of flexible method, or qualitative, research in useful ways, resulting in more chapters on these design types.

Very recently, realism, the epistemological framework advanced in this book, has been explored and endorsed by other writers in social work and related fields (Kazi 1998; Pawson & Tilley 1997). Further reading of my own in the philosophy of science has only strengthened my conviction about the usefulness of this position as an inclusive yet thoroughly scientific standpoint from which to conduct practice-relevant research (Anastas 1998; Klee 1997; Orange 1995; Papineau 1996). These developments confirm the importance of continuing to strengthen and further develop our understanding of these important and emerging epistemological ideas.

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Similarly, since 1993, attention to the analysis of science as it relates to groups that have traditionally been oppressed and/or excluded—in society and in social science—has continued (see, for example, Harding 1998; Hess 1995; LeVay 1996; Swigonski 1994). This edition both retains and tries to build on the inclusion and analysis of diversity issues in research.

In addition, because of the passage of time, all of the exemplars used in the 1993 edition were reviewed in the preparation of this one. Some of them were retained because they were judged to be classic enough that time has not altered their relevance. Others were replaced with more recently published works. Feedback from readers of the first edition has uniformly endorsed the inclusion of full-length studies as exemplars in the book because they bring the research design principles discussed to life so effectively. Updated exemplars should make them even more helpful and readable.

Finally, learning about research can seem like learning a new language. Users of the first edition of the book correctly observed that it could be improved by adding a glossary, which has been done as an appendix in this new edition. Readers are encouraged to make reference to it whenever they encounter a term in the text that seems unfamiliar or unclear.

The need for high-quality research in social work and the other helping professions has not diminished. The capacity of social workers and other human service professionals to generate practice-relevant research is growing. If this book can aid and inspire more people to get involved in learning about and doing research, its most important goal will have been achieved.

Preface to the First Edition

This book was originally a self-help enterprise: to produce a better text than those then available for teaching a research methods course. Three of us began the work together. We thought we already knew about doing research, and that our planned book would result mostly from a process of summary and distillation. But several years later, we find that the journey has led us into new terrain, to a new understanding, and a new way to talk about research design.

Much of what the reader knowledgeable about research will find here will seem familiar, although the way it is described and the terms that are used may be novel. Some of what such a reader will find here may seem quite unfamiliar, but we hope our approach may open up for such a reader new avenues of appreciation for a wider range of research methods and designs. For those new to research, the book endeavors to make the content accessible, to present the current controversies in the field, and to convey excitement about research as a professional enterprise.

This textbook has many goals. One of them is to present science and research from an epistemological position that can embrace a range of models of inquiry. Instead of adopting the heuristic perspective (Heineman Pieper 1985, 1989; Tyson 1992, 1995), which might best be described as a standpoint rather than as an epistemology, we embrace *fallibilistic realism* (Manicas & Secord 1983), described in chapter 1, as our epistemological framework. This perspective is one from which both what have been termed "qualitative" or naturalistic methods and traditional quantitative methods can be valued, learned, and taught. We use the terms *flexible* and *fixed* methods to differentiate these two general styles of doing research.

Our goal has been to treat both flexible and fixed methods even-handedly. But because fixed or quantitative methods have been the dominant paradigm in social science and social work research in this century, the types of research included in this tradition and the methods associated with them have been more thoroughly elaborated to date. Consequently, more space in the book is devoted to fixed

methods. It is our hope and expectation that in the future this imbalance may change as flexible methods of research are more often used and more fully explicated.

Another goal of this book has been to integrate content on women and people of color into the text. This integration has been achieved both through the examples of research we have provided and through our attempt to understand how racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of bias may affect the conceptualization and conduct of research. The basic perspective taken on research in this book has been shaped to some degree by the critiques of sexism and racism endemic in the traditional institutions and methods of the scientific enterprise itself. This effort at integration will no doubt be found to be incomplete, and readers may find much to criticize in this regard. Nevertheless, the book takes the position that in the context of a racist, sexist, and heterosexist society, few aspects of research methods are so completely technical that they should not be subject to such an analysis. The point is not whether or not a given method or study has been critiqued "correctly"; the point is that such analysis as an activity is the responsibility of every researcher and research consumer who claims to be concerned with social justice and professional service, just as it is in practice.

A final novel feature of this text is the inclusion of a few selected studies within the text itself as examples of the types of research being described, both flexible and fixed in method. They have been reproduced whole rather than excerpted, which is more common, to give students experience in reading complete studies—as they must learn to do as professionals—and in order that each work can be viewed in context and independently evaluated by our readers. While this makes the book seem long, these examples are referred to repeatedly throughout the text, whether the topic is research design as a whole, a sampling strategy, a specific method of data collection, or a method of data analysis. Most but not all of the studies are from social work literature. The inclusion of the studies is designed to permit teaching from what might be termed a *case study method*.

To choose examples, however, is always risky: no perfect study or report of a study is ever found. Each of these examples was chosen for a variety of reasons, but in the end the choices were to some extent arbitrary. Thus, no selected study should be seen either as an incomparable ideal or solely as an object to use in showing off a capacity to uncover flaws in others' methods or assertions. Instead, we hope that each article will serve as a springboard for learning and analysis that authors and readers will share as examples of what goes into a piece of research.

Because this book attempts to integrate discussion of a range of research methods into a single epistemological framework, the language used to discuss research design differs from what is usually encountered in books and courses about research. While different terminology always presents a challenge to readers, traditional terminology has only been altered when it seemed necessary to do so in order to represent a concept more accurately. However, as work proceeded, this necessity arose much more than anticipated.

For example, the term "flexible method research" is used in this book in preference to others: "qualitative research" confounds the form of the data with the method, while "naturalistic research" implies an epistemological position that is quite different from and more limited than the framework of realism provides. The term "flexible," in addition to being descriptive of an important feature of the method, provides a useful contrast

to the generic term, "fixed," used to characterize a range of contrasting methods. The term "quantitative" is similarly rejected because it confounds the form of the data or of the analysis with the general method: narrative data can in fact be analyzed in a fixed or quantitative way or in a flexible manner. "Relational research" is used in preference to the term "correlational research," again because the term "correlational" connotes one type of statistical analysis when more than one can be used; only advanced students of statistics understand that tests of group difference and correlational measures in fact have the same derivation mathematically. The hope is that the new language adopted, once learned, may prove clarifying for the reader as it has done for the writers.

The book, then, has some lofty goals. The first and most important is to provide an overview of scientific methods as they are used in social work to advance knowledge and improve practice. It is designed for use in research methods courses, especially those taught at the master's and doctoral levels of study. There is nothing contained in this text to preclude its use at an undergraduate level; however, the experience that has shaped the work has been teaching at the graduate level in social work.

As noted earlier, the book has incorporated content both on what have traditionally been termed "qualitative" methods, which are called *flexible methods,* and on "quantitative" ones, which are called *fixed methods*. This inclusion is evident both in the series of chapters on general types of research, in which flexible methods are discussed at length in a chapter of their own, and in the series of chapters on ethics, sampling, the various data collection methods, and use of the computer, each of which contains content relevant to both fixed and flexible method research. Finally, the section on data analysis also contains a separate chapter on the analysis of narrative or unstructured data.

This book, in addition to serving as a classroom text, can also function as a handbook to guide the student or graduate professional in the conduct of research of many kinds. Most chapters, therefore, contain both conceptual material to organize the topic being discussed and quite concrete information designed to provide a "how-to" for the professional researcher. The how-to features should also prove useful to students doing group or individual research projects, including thesis and dissertation work.

The first part of the book contains an orientation to scientific inquiry and the epistemological basis for it. The standpoint adopted, fallibilistic realism (Manicas & Secord 1983), might be termed "postpositivist" (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson, & O'Jack 1991), but it provides a basis for both traditional and more naturalistic models of inquiry. The risk of embracing differing points of view is that it is possible to satisfy no one; it should be acknowledged that, in particular, those who subscribe wholeheartedly either to a constructivist framework on the one hand, or to a logical positivist one on the other, are unlikely to feel comfortable with the position we have taken. However, the framework offered will be satisfying and useful to the majority of social workers and other human service professionals who in fact have respect for a variety of methods of research. This first part also includes a chapter on problem formulation, on how research questions are framed and developed, a topic critical to the research process that is less often addressed than the other stages of the research process that derive from it. Chapter 2 also

addresses the critical role that theory and knowledge, induction and deduction, and biases of several kinds may play in the shaping of a research study.

Part II covers the major types of designs used in social work research. Chapter 3 covers flexible method research in all its variety. Unlike the situation with fixed methods, which have dominated texts in the field for so long, it is not yet possible to articulate a clear typology of flexible methods of research.[1] Fixed methods, however, have been divided into descriptive, relational, and experimental designs, treated in chapters 5, 6, and 7, respectively. The category of relational research is original with us and is used to connote all of those forms of research investigating relationships among variables but in which variables are not experimentally manipulated. Some of what are usually termed quasi-experimental designs are thus discussed as relational studies and some as experiments. Chapter 8, the last chapter in part II, discusses single-subject designs as a fixed method of research.

Part II addresses general issues in the research process. Each chapter includes material on both fixed and flexible methods. Ethics in research are discussed first, in chapter 9, for they must guide each part of the research process as well as the conduct of the study as a whole. Sampling is explained in chapter 10. Principles of data collection, including the often taken-for-granted topic of the context of the research, is the topic of chapter 11.

Part IV is devoted to discussion of specific methods of data collection. Observation, interviewing, and designing questionnaires are discussed in chapters 12, 13, and 14, respectively. The chapters on observation and interviewing both incorporate material on gathering unstructured as well as structured data as these are the data collection methods most commonly used in flexible method research. These chapters and the one on questionnaires emphasize developing ways of gathering data for a study. Chapter 15, on selecting available measures, concludes part IV.

Part V, on analyzing data and disseminating the results of research, completes the review of the research process. Data analysis is divided into chapters on the content analysis of narrative data (chapter 16) and on descriptive (chapter 17) and inferential (chapter 18) statistics. A colleague, James Drisko, has contributed a chapter on using the computer for working with both qualitative and quantitative data (chapter 14). The essential step of disseminating research findings is often overlooked, so the book ends with chapter 20 on writing research reports.

When this book was begun, the idea was simply that it would improve somewhat upon the texts on research methods then available in social work and the human services. As the discussion, refinement, and articulation of ideas proceeded, however, it became evident that it was necessary to move into new intellectual territory in ways that were not originally anticipated. This journey has sometimes been a fearful but always an interesting one, and the reader, whether student, teacher, or practitioner, is invited to travel along. Readers may not always agree with the positions taken in this book, However, where we are now in the helping professions in our thinking about research will only be a way station in the rapidly evolving discourse about doing science in social work and the other human service professions.

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1. While the revised edition in fact adds traditional case studies to the section on flexible method research, the basic situation described remains the same as of this writing.

Acknowledgments

This book began as a three-person project. The early involvement of Carolyn Jacobs of the Smith College School for Social Work as a fellow teacher, coauthor, and colleague made the task initially seem possible. Although she withdrew from the project early on, Carolyn's initial ideas helped shape the book in essential ways, and her participation in early discussions about its content was indispensable in getting the project off to a good start. In addition, Margaret H. Whalen, who contributed a chapter to the first edition, provided informal but very welcome encouragement to the project as a whole.

Marian MacDonald, my coauthor for the first edition of this book, was essential to its very existence. As teaching colleagues, we struggled together to do a better job of giving students what they needed. Marian has the courage of her intellectual convictions, which often helped propel us forward onto new ground. Unfortunately as time went on, her other professional and personal commitments did not allow her to continue to work on the book. Her essential early contributions are appropriately recognized in her coauthorship of the first edition. Also, I want to warmly thank my colleague, Jim Drisko, for his willingness to rewrite the chapter on computer uses in research for this edition. His degree of expertise in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis is quite unusual and has enriched this edition of the book immeasurably. However, despite the essential contributions of these colleagues, as the one who has sustained authorship of the book for over a decade at this point, the primary responsibility for it, including its flaws, must rest with me.

There are also several other sources of support that I have enjoyed and that deserve public acknowledgement. A Brown Foundation Award from the Smith College School for Social Work's Clinical Research Institute supported me in part in writing the first edition of this text. I also want to thank the Smith College School for Social Work and its dean at the time, Ann Hartman, for a generous

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Many students have now read various chapters in draft and have used the book in their courses over the years. As they are its most important audience, their feedback has been and continues to be extraordinarily helpful. Their responses to the material as it has evolved have been very encouraging. Only those who teach can truly appreciate how generously students in fact continuously educate their teachers. I learn from and am inspired by my students on a daily basis. In the end, of course, despite all of these generous attempts to help, responsibility for the content of this work, rests entirely with its author.

Originally Margaret Zusky, then a Senior Editor with Lexington Books, provided unwavering moral and material support to us throughout what was a very long process of completing the first edition. Her patience and her confidence in us and in this book were essential to its completion. Since then, the book has become the property of Columbia University Press. In particular, Senior Executive Editor John Michel has been an invaluable, patient, and effective supporter of this work. Thank you, John, for helping to find this book a new home and for facilitating its much-needed revision and republication.

Finally, the encouragement and forbearance of friends and family members is essential to anyone who engages in the long, absorbing, and solitary work of writing a book. To Benjamin, Rhea, and Jonathan Anastas: thank you for the support and inspiration you have all provided. Finally, for all the times during the past many years that you did without companionship, put up with preoccupation, put a much-needed meal on the table, and, most importantly, expressed unfailing encouragement and affection—thank you, Jan.

About the Author

Jeane W. Anastas is currently Professor and Associate Dean at the Shirley M. Ehren-kranz School of Social Work at New York University. She earned her baccalaureate degree in social work at the Metropolitan College, Boston University (1976), her M.S.W. with a major in research at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work (1978), and her Ph.D. at the Heller School, Brandeis University (1982). She joined the Smith College School for Social Work faculty in 1983 as chair of the research sequence, a position she held until 1994. She then served as cochair of the school's doctoral program until 1999. From 1978 through 1982 she taught research methods and statistics on an adjunct basis at Boston University, first at the School of Social Work and later at Metropolitan College in the sociology department. She then served on the faculty of the Simmons College School of Social Work from 1980 through 1983. She also directed the Clinical Research Institute at the Smith College School for Social Work.

In addition to over 20 years' experience in teaching research to social workers, Anastas has considerable experience in conducting research in social agencies and in the community. She was the evaluator for a federally funded program serving pregnant teenagers and for a federally funded day-treatment program serving pregnant and postpartum substance-abusing women and their children in western Massachusetts. She has also consulted to national, state, and local-level research projects in the areas of eldercare, the epidemiology of child-hood emotional and behavioral problems, and mental health services for children.

Anastas has been active at state and local levels in the National Association of Social Workers, including serving for some years on its National Committee on Women's Issues. She has been appointed to the editorial board of *Affilia: The Journal of Women in Social Work* and is a consulting editor for the *Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. She has published in the areas of teaching research in social work, teen pregnancy, eldercare, substance abuse services, and gay/lesbian issues. Her most recent book, with coauthor George A. Appleby, is *Not Just a Passing Phase: Social Work with Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People*.

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