

What Makes a “Great” Social Work Research Question?

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Excellence in Leadership in Doctoral Education Award, presented by the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE)

I am truly honored and grateful to be one of the first recipients of this GADE award. Thank you to Dr. Liz Lightfoot and the GADE Steering committee for making this award possible, and congratulations to Paula Nurius for her well-deserved recognition as well.

I am glad that Liz mentioned, in her introduction, that I recently co-chaired a GADE Task Force on Revising the GADE Quality Guidelines for PhD programs (which resulted in the membership adopting new quality guidelines in 2013) because one aspect of that work is the focus of my brief remarks today. I want to present some ideas about “What makes a “great” social work research question?”

This task force was appointed by then GADE President Kia Bentley, and was co-chaired by myself and Donna Harrington, with Beverly Black and Renee Cunningham-Williams completing the membership. The task force (with the able assistance of PhD student Kyeongmo Kim) conducted a national survey of 417 students, faculty, and administrators, to obtain their opinions about what were the most important indicators of a quality social work PhD program. The full list of items/indicators spanned the realms of research, teaching, social work as a discipline, and program resources.

The HIGHEST RATED item on the survey was:

“GRADUATES UNDERSTAND WHAT MAKES A GOOD SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH QUESTION”.

So hopefully this finding resonates with your experience, students, and your program is focusing on this highest rated, most important indicator of a quality PhD social work education. I think sometimes we get very enamored with the data analysis phase or other phases of the research process, and this survey finding reminds us that those other phases lose relevance if the question itself is not an important one. In any case, the topic seems worthy of attention here today.

I’d like to first share some thoughts about what makes a good social work research question, and then discuss a little more at length some ideas about what might constitute a great social work research question.

First, here are some essential aspects of a good social work research question that I think would be agreed to by most social work educators:

1. The question is answerable, or “doable”. It is feasible to construct and implement a research design to answer the question in a reasonable amount of time.
2. The question is based solidly within the profession of social work, including its intellectual history, its core values, the person-in-environment perspective, and its focus on vulnerable populations.
3. The results of the question have potentially strong implications for social work practice and/or policy, preferably both.
4. The question addresses clear gaps in the literature.

There may be more essential aspects, but I think these are 4 on which there would be wide agreement.

Yet, what if you are a student who wants to have the maximum possible impact on our field—what if you want to ask a great social work question, not just a good one?

What constitutes a great social work research question?

I think that a key to asking a great social work research question, one that can have the strongest possible impact on the field of social work, is to locate the specific research question within a larger arena of scholarship that has the potential to transform social work practice and/or policy. Transformational change is significant, meaningful, and radical change in the way we think about and/or do things in our field. Transformational arenas of scholarship, and their corresponding research questions are ones, I think, which question and challenge the basic assumptions that undergird our common ways of doing things, the traditional and engrained ways of thinking and doing that are so accepted as a part of the culture that we rarely question them. Transformational change, lasting impact, results when we ask "What if we didn't assume "X" about this problem and this population, what if we assumed something different?"

So I want to provide some examples of transformative arenas of social work scholarship that I have observed in the last 25-30 years of my own career. These are offered both as examples of my main point and to demonstrate to the skeptics or cynics in the audience that transformational change is possible, it is real and ongoing.

Examples of transformational approaches in the last 25-30 years:

1. The Strengths Perspective. I was fortunate to have been present at the University of Kansas when the strengths perspective was born, and to have born witness to how it transformed social work practice. The essence of the strengths perspective was that it questioned the dominant assumptions that guided (and maybe still guide) most social work practice, because the usual and accepted thing to do was to take a deficit approach to helping clients identifying their deficits and focusing on changing these, in a typical "medical model" style.

The strengths perspective questioned the basic assumptions underlying that deficit approach and asked instead, "What if we focus on people's strengths instead of their deficits?"

So, a "good" social work question might be to ask about some aspect of a traditional approach to helping, while a "great" social work question might be to ask a similar question about some aspect of the strength perspective approach.

2. The consumer (client) as expert. Traditionally, a principle assumption about the client-professional relationship is that the professional is the expert who brings education and professional knowledge to solve the client's problems. But what if we assume instead that clients are the expert in their own lives? This more radical assumption is present in the Participant Action Research (PAR) research approach and in the Recovery movement in the adult mental health field, where consumers have dramatically changed the entire way of thinking about and dealing with the problems related to severe and persistent mental illness.

3. Deinstitutionalization and inclusion of persons with disabilities. 30 years ago, the predominant approach to the treatment of persons with severe disabilities and mental illness was to place them in institutions. Children with these disabilities were not allowed to attend public schools. Society assumed that these people's problems were so severe and so serious that they could not be dealt with in local communities or public schools.

But consumers themselves, along with lawyers and sympathetic policy makers and yes, some social workers, asked "What if we didn't assume that these people have to be in institutions, what if we tried out best to keep adults in their local communities and children in public schools?" So today most institutions have been closed and children with a wide range of serious disabilities attend public schools with their peers.

In the interest of time I only briefly mention some other potential examples: Housing First approaches to homelessness; restorative justice in the criminal justice system; putting families as the unit of attention, not the individual, in such arenas as children's mental health and child welfare (e.g. family preservation and family group conferences).

I will close with a specific example of a dissertation question which I think fits the bill of a "great" social work research question. In the field of child welfare, there is a fledgling attempt in a few circles to include the voices of the parents of abused and neglected children in the policy-making and administration of child welfare programs. That is, to encourage parent involvement not just in the case level decision-making (which itself is somewhat rare in many places), but in the making of agency policies and procedures. This transformational approach counters the notion that parents who have abused and neglected their children are not really worthy of or deserving of a voice. Jeri Damman, one of our PhD candidates at KU, is completing a dissertation whose central question is: "How are these fledgling efforts at empowering parents in the child welfare system working?" She has constructed a qualitative research design which asks the parents themselves what they think are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts, and what can be done to improve them. The results have the potential to help transform the child welfare system.

So, I hope that you will consider "hitching your wagon" to one of these or some other transformational arena of social work scholarship, some area that questions the standard, traditional, dominant way of doing things. If you can figure out how to locate your social work research questions in this way, you will have the opportunity to make a strong and lasting impact on our field.

Thank you for your time and thank you for this award.

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