

The Philosophers Autobiography: A Qualitative Study

Evaluating Qualitative Research for Social Work Practitioners

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Abstract: In the field of social work, practitioners must remain well informed regarding research advances in their respective areas. Proponents of evidence-based practice expect social workers to engage in practice informed by the best available evidence. Research studies conducted through the lens of qualitative inquiry provide important contributions to the social work knowledge base. In many cases, these studies can represent the best available research regarding emerging problems or application of evidence to diverse populations. Yet, despite the relevance of qualitative research, many social workers receive minimal training regarding qualitative methodology hindering their ability to conduct and evaluate research that uses qualitative methods. The purpose of this article is to provide students and practitioners some orientation regarding qualitative research methods and to highlight potential strategies researchers and consumers of research may use to evaluate the trustworthiness and quality of qualitative research. Specifically, the concept of trustworthiness is defined in the context of qualitative inquiry and questions social work practitioners can ask when evaluating the quality and applicability of a qualitative research study are provided.

Keywords: Qualitative, research methods, trustworthiness

INTRODUCTION

As social workers intervene with individuals, families, and communities, it is critical to remain informed regarding the literature base and research advances specific to one's field of practice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW)'s Code of Ethics (1999) asserts the importance of engaging in practice informed by prevailing research when it states "social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work." Similarly, the Council on Social Education (CSWE) recently identified ten core competencies of social work practice, one of which involves engaging in "research-informed practice and practice-informed research" (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement has increased the expectation that social workers actively seek research findings related to their particular domain of practice (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003; Jenson, 2005). Specifically, EBP asserts social workers make decisions guided by research evidence working in conjunction with clinical expertise and client preferences (Gambrell, 2007; Gilgun, 2005; McNeece & Thyer, 2004).

Although most would agree with the importance of identifying and reading research articles related to one's area of practice, there are many challenges social workers face as they seek to achieve this goal (Adams, Matto, & LeCroy, 2009). First, social workers are under increased pressure to do more in less time. Caseloads are increasing and budget

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