1 Social work research and the dissertation

Introduction

This book seeks to guide and support students who are undertaking small-scale qualitative research as part of a social work course, including at undergraduate, postgraduate or post-qualification level. It sets out to help meet the many requirements for a dissertation, which is typically a distinct part of taught social work courses and one which requires a more extended period of personal study and application. However, this book can also be used by practitioners undertaking research as part of their social work role, or perhaps due to personal interest.

As well as literature-based research, this book also accommodates empirical research undertaken directly with participants, typically between 1 and 12 participants, although larger samples are possible. This approach is motivated by a belief that the limited time available to busy social work students means that involvement with larger samples can compromise the available time and therefore the quality of other core aspects of a dissertation, such as the literature review or writing up. As Denscombe (2007) has also highlighted, substantive social research with smaller groups of people still leads to the researcher interacting with, and absorbing, all of the research processes involved with larger groups.

As Bell (1987: 1) suggests, within social research ‘the problems facing you are much the same whether you are producing a small project, an MEd dissertation or a PhD’. Such ‘problems’ include a need to select and carefully outline a research topic, to thoroughly review any relevant literature, apply a research methodology and method, and analyse and write up any findings. This book explores all of these processes in relation to small-scale social work research.
How to use this book

Although it can be used on its own, this book will offer more substantive support if used in conjunction with related publications. Qualitative social research remains a discipline that has generated a wide range of course textbooks. For any student or practitioner, this will offer a set of valuable resources on which to draw. For this reason, at the end of each chapter there is a list of relevant readings that can supplement and extend any discussions regarding the themes covered in each chapter.

The nature of research and qualitative research

Research has been defined as ‘planned, cautious, systematic and reliable ways of finding out or deepening [our] understanding’ of a selected topic or theme. It also involves some form of investigation, exploration of an issue, trend or social group; and typically entails theoretical and philosophical support and analysis (Blaxter et al., 1996: 5). Research within social work may also seek to ask wider ontological (in philosophy, the nature of being or existence) questions that link to the experiences or attitudes of research participants, or a particular theme under investigation. Such questions may seek to unravel the ethical or moral dimensions of a form of social work intervention, or seek to ask difficult questions about why a particular ‘service user’ group has not received necessary support.

Although a definition of research is relatively easy to construct, the processes of research tend to be more varied and contestable. Research process is the way in which research develops or moves on: both in a physical sense of completing necessary tasks such as reading or interviewing, and in relation to the changing thoughts, ideas, beliefs and values of the researcher as their work proceeds. Regarding process there are also different types of research: for example, pure (theoretical and conceptual) and applied (practical combined with theoretical) research, commercial and academic research, covert (hidden) or overt (unconcealed) research methods, among others.

One of the most apparent distinctions within social research is that which divides qualitative and quantitative processes. Whereas quantitative social research tends to draw on large samples, uses statistics and often aims to be scientific, objective (unbiased) and value-free, qualitative social research instead seeks to engage with one or more of the following:

- explores in great depth the attitudes, and/or behaviour and/or experiences of research participants;
- identifies, discusses and explains the often detailed opinions of participants;
• focuses upon the everyday and sometimes ‘gritty’ and ‘real’ life of select people; explores the emotive opinions, experiences and actions that are linked to the research journey and sometimes called an *emic* perspective;
• remains *context*-bound, or attempts to be both ethically and politically sensitive to any research environment and settings, and looks for explanations, trends, themes, outcomes which help us to explain and understand;
• often highlights the political nature of social research and especially the impact of culturally relative influences such as gender, power, disability, class and sexuality, among others;
• maintains a close and sometimes personal and emotionally sensitive relationship between the researcher and participants;
• can attempt to change social and political systems through research, such as by empathizing with participants’ needs or forms of disadvantage, and subsequently criticizing taken-for-granted assumptions within society;
• does not generally seek to be objective, distant and value-free, but instead acknowledges the impact of the researcher upon participants and seeks to view each as equals rather than as subjects or distant objects ‘under a microscope’.

(Adapted from Sapsford and Abbott, 1996; Holloway, 1997: 5; Dawson, 2007)

This definition relates to applied research in which direct contact is made with participants. However, literature-based social research, which concentrates upon exploring related publications and theoretical concepts, still draws on the same research *culture* or outlook. A literature-based dissertation will again aim to explore themes such as the role of ethics in social work practice, personal or group attitudes, needs or behaviour and political outcomes, or the impact of legislation and policy upon practitioners or service users. It may also seek to critically engage with established theory or practice, or compare different forms of social work practice including those in different countries, and so forth. This distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is further explored in Chapter 3.

**The benefits of research for social work students and practitioners**

There are various reasons why qualitative research is appealing and relevant to social work. To begin with, there are strong links between the culture of research and social work in practice. For example, Gilgun (1994) proposes that remarkable similarities persist between qualitative research and social work
practice. These include a joint recognition of the impact of wider social, political and cultural factors upon the behaviour and attitudes of both service users and research participants. The shared importance of collecting detailed information from different sources – such as part of the assessment processes for the social worker and the research interview undertaken by a researcher – provides another link. Engagement and empathy with service users or participants should be also central within both roles. Dominelli (2005) also highlights mutual attempts to stimulate change and empowerment.

A piece of research can also help any student or practitioner to do the following:

- better understand the context under which they practise;
- offer a broader and more detailed understanding of social ‘problems’, needs and the impact(s) of social work interventions;
- gain new insight into themes such as those relating to policy, legislation and political, economic or cultural dynamics – for example, issues related to class, gender, power relations or the educational needs of practitioners or service users, etc. – that impinge upon aspects of practice;
- broaden any prior understanding of service user or carer needs, and possibly also those of future work colleagues;
- help achieve a greater sense of satisfaction and achievement, such as through increased confidence gained through a sense of accomplishment, especially if more appropriate social work interventions eventually follow as a result;
- provide better advice, guidance and other forms of support to people in need due to increased knowledge and skills gained;
- increase the capacity to use our imagination by stimulating thought and ideas.

Royse (1991: 9) has argued that social work research not only can make us better practitioners, it can also be exciting and represent a type of adventure:

Social science research is exciting because it studies a lively topic – people. As we learn more about people and their problems, we become better practitioners. Research is conducted by social workers in the field and in universities who are adventurers extending the frontiers of their field of knowledge.

Social work research is distinct from some other disciplines because many findings can be applied in practice almost immediately. Unlike some related disciplines, it is not merely theoretically focused, but instead can have an instant impact on the lives of people who come into direct contact with social
workers. In relation to this, the merger of research and practice is increasingly identified as essential.

Potentially, social work practice and, in particular, interventions, can have a profound impact on a service user’s or informal carer’s life. Inevitably more informed practice through good research (and the resources available to support it) may lead to more positive outcomes for vulnerable social groups who come into contact with social workers. Nevertheless, Ian Shaw (2012: 43) cautions against exaggerating the distinctiveness of social work research:

Social work and social work research will be the poorer if we over-emphasize the distinctives. It will make us disinclined to listen to the voices of colleagues in other disciplines and professions. If we espouse joined-up services, why not disciplinary joined-up research? On most occasions the right question to ask is not what makes social work research distinctive, but what might make it distinctively good?

Keeping an open mind about other disciplines and methodologies is as important a skill as any other for all types of research.

The social work dissertation

A dissertation is an extended essay or thesis which seeks to examine, analyse and then present evidence or a coherent set of findings to support a set of related arguments or cogent debates with particular objectives. A dissertation is a thesis which in Greek refers to an intellectual proposition, and this is built upon systematic evidence and arguments. Inevitably to present a strong thesis to a reader or examiner one must undertake extensive and focused reading (much like an essay) and possibly collect other ‘evidence’ such as through interviews to convince the reader of your thesis. Another way of looking at a dissertation is as a collection of interrelated essays which each link together through the overall aim and objective(s) of your research.

There are two main types of social work dissertation. First, an empirical study (applied research) in which literature is searched before or alongside interviews or other methods of collecting empirical data or information. Second, a non-empirical (conceptual) or literature-based dissertation in which we look more at, say, policy, ethics, practice, concept(s), theory or an explicit theme of interest (such as assessment or safeguarding) in great detail. Both types of dissertation have their pros and cons but, in general, empirical research is more difficult to predict and control because you are relying upon other people to gain access for interviews. In contrast, a literature-based dissertation is likely to require more time reading and spending more time in the library, yet you also have more word space to present and unpack your conceptual or theoretical arguments.
Dissertations in social work tend to be extremely varied. For example, Dellgran and Hojer’s (2003) exploration of 589 social work dissertations (Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD level) completed in Sweden between 1977 to 1998, discovered a ‘wide range of analyses of different social problems and interventions’ undertaken by students. Despite this, research undertaken was predominately qualitative, and relied upon small samples which stressed an in-depth exploration of one of many areas of study. These dissertations also drew on different disciplines, most notably psychology, sociology, law and social policy. Trends which formed over the years included an interest in ‘social problems and phenomena’, the workings of organizations (including social work departments), and specific service user groups and casework. Also students’ interest in community work, social policy and poverty had tended to recede over the years.

There is, nevertheless, a downside to being offered more choice within a multi-disciplinary subject such as social work. In particular, deciding on a feasible topic from so many possible options can cause problems. The somewhat uncertain, if not nebulous, nature of ‘social work’ as a discipline also means that there is a greater danger that non-suitable topics can be selected. It is therefore paramount at the early stages of research that close contact with a tutor is maintained in order to ensure that any research topic is suitable. Generally it is also important to have a focused topic, be realistic regarding its feasibility and also ask to what extent any topic can be used to influence practice. These themes are explored further in Chapter 2.

Most social work dissertations tend to be around 8000 to 15,000 words in length, and there is usually an expectation of a significant amount of time spent in personal study prior to submission. For example, as part of a Master’s dissertation module on a postgraduate social work course, there is typically an expectation of at least 600 hours of personal study in order to complete it. This figure helps to emphasize the amount of commitment that is usually required for a project that can generate considerable work. In relation to this, an early start is always advisable and, perhaps inevitably, leaving things until the last minute needs to be avoided wherever possible. One reason for this is that the process of social work research is rarely predictable or linear – again, as with social work practice, there are times when things do not go according to plan. This might include problems relating to access to participants or unplanned difficulties in accessing relevant literature, and so forth.

Although initially a dissertation can sometimes seem like an insurmountable mountain to climb, it is worth remembering that all dissertations adhere to a basic format and processes which are remarkably similar to other forms of assessed work. At either graduate or postgraduate level you are likely to have already passed numerous assessments which have indicated your ability to pursue a research project by the time you begin a dissertation. Although new roles (such as interviewing research participants) may seem a challenge, they
remain tasks which are within your capability, and which you may have already experienced when on a practice placement. The key difference for a dissertation is that the **scale** of the work is greater, and there is therefore more need to plan ahead and read more widely around related themes. Another distinct quality of the dissertation is that a student is expected to be able to bring together and utilize skills and knowledge, such as those gained on previous modules, *within one project* that is also managed much more independently. There is also an expectation of an ability to engage with more analysis and critical insight, relating to any topic or research question. Each of these themes is explored in detail in later chapters.

**Bachelor’s, Master’s and post-qualification courses**

In many countries there are three different course routes that involve a social work dissertation. For example, in the UK they include the Master’s degree, and, much more recently, the Bachelor’s degree and post-qualification (PQ) routes. A dissertation (and other assessed forms of social research such as a ‘long essay’ or research project) will tend to be pitched at the highest level of any course. This is especially so when regarding formal institutional requirements and regulations, but also more informal expectations placed on students by tutors.

In the UK, the expectations attached to all dissertations include an ability to do the following:

- review, assess and apply to social work practice a coherent body of knowledge (such as a theory);
- draw on, and critically apply, ideas and concepts from a range of relevant sources (for example, books, journals, newspapers, the internet, etc.);
- use and transfer research skills (for example, communication, interview, writing, and so on) within and across major social and human science disciplines;
- consider, assess and evaluate new concept(s) (both theoretical and practical) and apply each to a piece of social research;
- be able to select and apply relevant methods to a research topic;
- be aware of, and seek to apply, the values and beliefs of anti-discriminatory practice;
- express, articulate and contextualize findings in a final report;
- show some initiative, and not rely solely on the advice and direction offered by tutors.

The assumption for any dissertation module is that students will already have engaged in numerous research-related activities. This will include those relating to essays, presentations, seminars, reading, analysis, and so on. Qualified social work practitioners will already have prior experience undertaking similar academic assessment-related roles, for example, as part of a first social work qualification or an initial degree and/or Master’s in social work.

What will be less familiar to many students and practitioners, however, remains a capacity to engage in applied research, as well as fulfil a longer and therefore more demanding piece of academic work. In practice, this will involve the capacity to decide and explore a research question of one’s own choosing (Chapter 2), and more formal and sustained engagement and awareness of research methodologies and methods (explored in Chapters 5 to 8), qualitative analysis (Chapter 9) and the writing up of one’s findings (Chapter 10).

Despite the same expectations listed above for all three types of social work course there are some distinctions between them. The different expectations for the three social work courses in the UK are summarized in Table 1.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bachelor’s degree with Honours and the PQ awards in social work (for non-approved social workers)</th>
<th>Master’s degree and the PQ award for approved social workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge</td>
<td>Show originality in the application of knowledge, and the ability to tackle and solve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand and apply relevant research methods</td>
<td>Design and apply appropriate research methodologies and demonstrate expertise in specialized professional skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use specialized and professional skills across a major discipline</td>
<td>Display a mastery of a complex and specialist area of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess and evaluate new concepts and evidence from a range of sources</td>
<td>Use critical knowledge to understand, promote and develop service user and carer rights and empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer and apply relevant skills and exercise judgement in a variety of research situations</td>
<td>Use independent critical judgement to take a leading role in systematically developing personal practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codify and articulate research findings</td>
<td>Be able to disseminate results of research topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a distinction between a Bachelor's and a Master's degree and also any PQ awards, including the PQ award for approved social workers. In general there are more expectations placed on Master's students and those undertaking further training within mental health services at PQ level. For example, there is an assumption that at this level more evidence should be provided of critical and analytical insight regarding any topic of study, and also that there should be more evidence of originality (especially in the final write-up). Therefore, students cannot simply offer a ‘guided tour’ of any available published literature related to any one topic. They must also provide some new insight(s), and more rigorously investigate related issues which might draw on any primary research undertaken. Originality might emerge from recommendations made for future social work practice or suggested reforms to an established theory, policy or piece of legislation. Master’s and some PQ students are also expected to be more versatile in understanding and applying research methodologies (theoretical frameworks or ideas orientating a researcher’s work), a point explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

Because they have previously studied at a higher level, Master’s and some PQ students are also expected to be able to take more initiative for their own learning. In other words, although they will still be expected to keep their tutors informed of progress throughout their research, in general, they may be less likely to require as much formal supervision and guidance. It is also expected that such students have a relatively strong grasp of theory due to longer periods previously spent in study. Finally, Master’s and some PQ students are expected to be able to disseminate (distribute or apply) their research findings, for example, by being able to present findings to an audience or draw directly upon findings and apply as part of social work practice (explored further in Chapter 10).

At Bachelor’s degree and standard PQ level there is more emphasis upon engaging with less theoretically informed roles such as assessing new concepts and applying research methods, alongside other relevant skills. There is also no formal expectation of a fluent use of theory; instead theory should be utilized wherever necessary. Despite a lack of formal expectation, however, this does not mean that theory may not be used fluently or dissemination may not proceed. With generally unpredictable and typically diverse research processes within qualitative research it is likely that the distinctions drawn above may well blur from time to time. This will depend upon what it is you decide to research and how this is undertaken. In practice, any such regulations should be seen as offering general guidelines and minimum requirements rather than strict and rigid rules to adhere to. For example, the lesser expectations relating to Bachelor’s and some PQ courses should be looked upon as potentially beneficial regarding a minimum set standard level to reach, rather than as a set of stipulated rules to aspire to. If in doubt, it is important to consult with a personal tutor.
Levin (2005: 15–16) offers a helpful guide of basic expectations for any dissertation from an examiner’s perspective. Key attributes include:

- command of the subject matter;
- ability to ‘conceive of a purposeful, feasible and manageable project’ and frame a concise and meaningful research question;
- ability to choose and apply a clear and appropriate research methodology;
- awareness of the subtleties of a subject, eye for relevance and significance and a capacity to ‘see connections and to handle a complex subject matter without oversimplifying it’;
- ability to see ‘both the “big picture” and significant details’;
- evidence that relevant literature has been read;
- some evidence of an ability ‘to think critically and independently’;
- evidence that work has been done carefully, with detail and without ‘loose ends’ remaining;
- evidence of advocacy regarding arguments and a capacity ‘to put forward a point of view and argue for it’.

Each of these qualities, and others, are explored in much more detail throughout this book.

Finally in the UK at least there has increasingly emerged a greater focus placed upon relevance to social work practice and skills. Some such pressures relate to the recent Munro (2010) Review of Child Protection which has made a series of recommendations including (in principle at least) the encouragement of more flexible approaches to assessment procedures, fewer formal relations with service users and less organisational priority being given to the following of bureaucratic procedures including in relation to pre-set government targets. Courses in the UK are also being encouraged to make more explicit links to social work practice such as by encouraging students to make more explicit links to essential social work skills such as communication or interviewing. Each course tends to differ and Universities or higher education institutions have different requirements so it may help to check with your tutor or supervisor to see if there are now any special additional requirements. In general making closer links to social work practice is unlikely to remain an onerous task. For example, using your research findings to make some cogent recommendations about future social work practice or policy in a concluding chapter is a common way of making stronger links to practice as is discussion of an explicit social work theory such as systems or task centered approaches. You may, of course, decide to take this further and perhaps write a thesis about interview or empathy skills or the role of communication in anti-discrimination approaches. The Munro recommendations and reforms have nevertheless been criticized, especially for ignoring the impact of a historic lack of resources
available within social work, while placing too much emphasis upon blaming hard-pressed front-line practitioners and ignoring wider factors that affect service users and practitioners such as poverty or corrosive managerialism (Rajan-Rankin and Beresford, 2011).

**What makes a good social work dissertation?**

Social work dissertations tend to accommodate diverse topics yet certain processes are followed, involving attributes or qualities that together help to construct a strong and coherent thesis. These include:

- **Defining a focused topic as early as possible as well as clear research objectives:** Typically these requirements are strengthened through further reading and each is discussed further in Chapter 2.
- **Critically analysing the literature that ties to a focused topic:** Presenting a coherent thread of arguments and ‘thematic’ points that move from one to another (as in a good academic paper or textbook), avoiding sudden jolts in topics explored or points raised and drawing from other studies and literature are all likely to allow your presented work to appear more palatable and convincing to the examiner. This process is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.
- **Drawing upon relevant theory:** This may include relevant theories drawn from sociology, social policy, psychology, health care or social work itself. Theory is discussed further in Chapter 4.
- **Relating your topic to social work practice:** This may be in a historic context or regard current service provision or individual practices or policy.
- **Creating a good structure:** The way in which you arrange and present any thesis will strengthen its content from the point of any reader. Structures are discussed further in Chapters 5 and 10.
- **Critically analysing your findings and research:** This may include relating any findings to practice; placing them in context or adding detail, meaning and understanding to what you have read and discovered; summarizing and comparing different studies and evidence, arguments and counter-arguments; and exploring and debating your findings such as through comparison and critical insight. Analysis is explained in Chapter 9 but is also detailed in parts throughout this book.

The key then is to select a valid topic and then aim for focus, diligence and **rigour** in your reading and research methods drawn upon. Research findings and theory are then used to detail, evaluate and address your research objectives, which should also link to social work practice. Finally, the study should be of relevance and interest and valid as regards your course and future professional needs.

Each of these goals will be discussed in much more detail in this book.
Research ethics

Research ethics refer to ‘rules of morally good conduct’ which should be ‘grounded in moral and political beliefs’ (Gomm, 2003: 298). Within applied or practical ethics priority has tended to be given to determined morally ‘good’ behaviour above all else; however, what constitutes good and not good behaviour remains highly subjective and open to interpretation. As Vesey and Foulkes (1999: 105) remind us, ‘There is much disagreement as to what constitutes the good life, and it is not clear whether there can be a definite resolution of such divergencies.’ Despite this, according to Banks (2002), social work has tended to embed itself within core aspects of the ideas of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, especially the importance of maintaining dignity and respect for others, complying with universal moral rules and determining the qualities of individual actions.

Dominelli (2002), however, in drawing on feminism as well as the opinions of other critical theories and thinkers, argues that this is not enough, and that social workers should also seek to engage in struggles for equality and social justice, especially on behalf of less powerful groups including women, disabled people, minority ethnic group members, and so forth. Based on evidence that inequities of opportunity and outcome (regarding access to education, wealth, employment, housing, and so on) impact upon many people, and usually more so on service users, it can be said that the aim to promote justice and equality can only be achieved through attempts to correct this imbalance. Within social research this may be achieved by drawing attention to forms of discrimination and disadvantage, especially the ways in which particular people experience its many forms.

Robson (1993) has provided a cogent list of good practices when undertaking ethical research. In brief, these include:

- Always maintaining respect for participants.
- Avoiding deception with participants, such as by telling lies or concealing any hidden research intentions.
- Respecting at all times the human rights of research participants, such as by not forcing your own values or opinions onto participants.
- Gaining permission in advance to undertake research, including from relevant organizations, ‘gatekeepers’ and if necessary formal committees (e.g. university or Health Care Trust or Local Authority).
- Never attempting to coerce potential ‘subjects’ into participating (such as through manipulation).
- Avoiding exposing participants to mental or physical stress.
- Never invading a person’s or social group’s privacy (e.g. attending a meeting despite not being invited).
• Not undermining the confidence or self-esteem of participants during research.
• Avoiding inducing participants to commit specific acts that undermine their confidence or which are inappropriate.

As can be seen, the emphasis is very much upon gaining permission from relevant authorities to undertake your research, maintaining positive traits such as honesty, sensitivity, empathy and tact, and avoiding deception, lies, and so forth. Additional concerns regards ethical research include:

• Avoiding malevolence and always being dignified when in the company of participants.
• Thanking participants for their involvement and letting them know what will happen to any data collected (e.g. will it be published or presented to an audience?).
• Avoiding discrimination or prejudice such as making implicit assumptions or holding stereotypical views about minority and disadvantaged groups.
• Participation should be voluntary and participants should be able to leave a project at any point.
• **Informed consent** should be sought, which includes making participants aware of the objectives and likely outcomes of the research.
• There should be clear plans regarding any data collected, including how to ensure it is secure, stored safely, presented without revealing participants’ names or identity, and eventually destroyed.
• Ensuring the **confidentiality** of participants.

The power that a researcher may have over participants (such as that gained through their knowledge or status) means that intended or unintended mistreatment, or even exploitation, is a possibility. For this reason (among others) we have formulated research ethics, and more recently there have been attempts to develop specific research ethics or codes for social work. Codes of ethics encourage researchers to become more accountable for the dissemination of their findings, but also attempt to regulate research techniques, in particular, so as to avoid malpractice, incompetence or dishonesty and abuse. Ethics within social research therefore can go beyond the relationship between researcher and participant, and attempt to place ‘responsibility upon the researcher to his/her wider research community’ (McCauley, 2003: 98–9).

Until recently, research in the social sciences had been based on ‘informal codes of ethics’ which often contained ‘ambiguities and contradictions [that] mean[t] most social scientists could justify any course of research as “ethical”’ (Truman, 2003: 3, my emphasis). However, this culture is being
reformed, and research undertaken as part of a social work course is now typi-
cally screened by ethics or research governance committees. They are created
to ‘regulate research and to quality assure that research proposals and pro-
cesses are ethical’ (McLaughlin, 2007: 55), and they have the power to decide
whether or not to grant ‘ethical approval’ to a proposed piece of research.
Increasingly, for social work, such committees or panels are led by staff trained
within a health care discipline, and this can create problems for social work
students and staff. In particular, there may be possible tensions regarding
contrasting approaches of research, as Darlington and Scott (2002: 23) stress:

Ethics review boards are often unfamiliar with qualitative research
and this can create difficulties for researchers . . . Some of the most
common areas of misunderstanding in relation to qualitative research
relate to the often small sample size and the lack of specific hypoth-
eses, control groups and predetermined questions, which can lead to
the false assumption that the proposed study is not sufficiently
rigorous.

Truman (2003: 12) is also critical, highlighting the impact of research commit-
tees on particular types of participatory research (in which participants play
an active role in research design and process) and that are now popular in the
social sciences and social work:

The way that processes of ethical review have been formulated is
particularly problematic for researchers working within a participa-
tory paradigm since they add a further set of barriers to the creation
of democratic knowledge whereby people who are the subject of
research production can influence how knowledge about them is
conceived, produced and disseminated.

Butler (2002: 243–7) has proposed a 15-point code of social work research
ethics. Among other qualities and attributes, the author suggests that social
work researchers should endeavour wherever possible to do the following:

- Take practical and moral responsibility for their work.
- Seek to empower service users and promote their welfare.
- Respect human rights and ‘aim towards social justice’, especially for
  service users.
- Be anti-discriminatory at all times.
- Serve the greater good, and seek to avoid any harm for service users.
- Inform all participants ‘of all features of the research’ and ‘respect the
  individual participant’s absolute right to decline to participate in or
  withdraw from [a] research programme’.
• Ensure confidentiality at all stages for research participants and service users.
• Allow research participants the right to withdraw from a project at any point.
• Report research findings even if they ‘reflect unfavourably on agencies of the central or local state, vested interests . . . as well as prevailing wisdom and orthodox opinion’.
• Acknowledge any part played by participants.

McLaughlin (2007: 52) suggests that this code can be used alongside Banks’s (2002) four-point ethical rules for practice that stress respect for people, the promotion of service user empowerment, the aim to support social justice and endeavours to maximize the interests of service users.

There are, however, some problems attached to any attempt to create a professional code of research ethics. For example, a paradox persists between (minority) professional interests (for example, power, status and financial reward) and what may appear as rhetorical claims to protect and support service users. Also most dissertations and pieces of qualitative research demand creativity, flair, and the use of initiative – qualities that are likely to be restricted within the confines of a rigid code. As Holdaway (1982, cited in Seale et al., 2004: 8) argues, professional codes of ethics tend to ‘deal with predictable and planned research, conditions which are not present in fieldwork’. Some researchers may also argue that a small piece of research that bypasses one or two rules relating to a code – yet which may lead to wider forms of social justice being achieved later on – is ethical due to the eventual political *outcomes* rather than the research *process*. As Seale et al. (2004: 8–9) propose:

[Critics] maintain . . . that covert research is ethical when the social actor observed plays a public/civic function or service for service users, customers and clients . . . Professional ethical codes for researchers are too often constituted as armchair criticism, distanced from the needs of the research practice. In addition, even if ethical codes aim to be universal, they are a product of a local culture and . . . are not easily exported outside the original culture.

For such reasons, as Butler (2002) himself acknowledges, codes of ethics tend to require continuous reform and revision. Despite possible deficits, the code of ethics for social work does offer a useful summary of non-discriminatory practices, and also attempts to encourage critical research which may question state agencies and the authority of their representatives. As McLaughlin (2007: 54) suggests, such codes offer clear guidance ‘on how to act and as a means to protect research subjects from malpractice or abuse’. 
The following list seeks to offer general guidelines regarding some key ethical issues for a social work dissertation. They include the need to do the following:

- Always seek permission from a reliable and dependable source for any intended empirical research and inform research participants of what you are doing.
- Discuss any potential concerns or uncertainties with your personal tutor or module supervisor regarding the ethics of an intended approach.
- Maintain respect, honesty and trust with research participants and identify each as an *equal* rather than as an *object* of observation or study.
- Avoid forms of discrimination or prejudice at all times, including preconceived assumptions or stereotypes relating to the cultural habits, behaviour or attitudes of particular groups of people (for example, older people or members of minority religious or ethnic groups).
- Avoid covert and other forms of ‘hidden’ research – in general, such potentially devious research is unlikely to be granted permission from an ethics committee or supervisor.
- Avoid harm and risk to participants, and carefully consider any implications of undertaking direct research with vulnerable people, such as children or adults with a learning disability.
- Ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, especially regarding personal and other sensitive information gained from participants or elsewhere.
- Aim for advocacy and empowerment.
- Seek to encourage social justice within your overall research wherever possible.
- Decide where data is likely to be stored and ensure that there is no risk of sensitive information being lost or being accessed without permission.

By its very nature, social research has always had the potential to encourage positive social change, such as by allowing disadvantaged groups to have a voice or drawing attention to forms of social injustice. For some people involved in social work research, such as Dominelli (2002) or Humphries (2008), this remains the only form of research that can be identified as being truly ethical.

**Structure of the book**

This book is divided into ten chapters. As is typical for social work and social research, the book will not be read from cover to cover. This is because a
variety of topics or research questions will be pursued by different students, and sections of a particular book will relate to some but not others. There is therefore a distinction between core chapters that relate to all dissertations and optional chapters that link to some topics but not others. Core chapters include this one and Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 9 and 10. Engagement with other chapters will depend upon your selected research topic, and related research method and methodology used.

This chapter looks at the requirements for a dissertation at different levels, including at degree, postgraduate and post-qualification level. The chapter identifies the nature and benefits of research for social work, and the prioritizing of research ethics. Chapter 2 looks in more detail at research processes followed as part of a social work dissertation. These include essential requirements such as selecting a suitable topic, undertaking a literature review, selecting and applying suitable research method(s), analysing data and finally, the writing up and dissemination of any findings.

Chapter 3 discusses general research concepts. These include a discussion of the distinct attributes of qualitative research, and the differences between applied and pure, and inductive and deductive research. Chapter 4 looks at social research theory and introduces the four main types of theory used in qualitative social work research – positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and postmodernism. Chapter 5 explores a vital stage within any dissertation: the literature survey or review. It is argued that alongside the setting of a research question with its related aims and objectives, and qualitative analysis completed throughout a study, the literature review represents a pivotal part of any dissertation. This is because the literature review is directly related to, and therefore supports, other aspects of a dissertation, including the application of research methods such as interviews and analysis, the writing-up stage, and so on. The literature review offers a foundation on which the quality of much of the final dissertation is likely to rest. This chapter also details the specific requirements of literature-based dissertations and explores some of the different methodological approaches and techniques used to undertake a literature review.

Chapter 6 explores the use of practical frameworks, philosophy and theory within social work research – usually identified as a research methodology that helps to frame and encourage meaning within any research project. This chapter also identifies examples of specific methodologies used within social work research. Chapters 7 and 8 explore research methods and methodology used within applied or conceptual and theoretical social work research. Chapter 7 looks at traditional methods that include the one-to-one interview, the questionnaire and focus group. Chapter 8 examines newer and often more complex methodologies that include narrative analysis, discourse analysis and life history approaches.

Chapter 9 details qualitative analysis and this can sometimes be a more demanding aspect of a dissertation. Although much analysis takes place
towards the end stage of a dissertation, it usually begins earlier (such as during the literature review) and proceeds throughout. Chapter 10, the final one, explores the writing up of a dissertation. Once again, although often assumed to begin towards the end of a project, writing can, and indeed should, begin earlier. This chapter also details the writing up of literature-based dissertations and suggests some ways in which your research findings might be disseminated, including as part of social work practice.

**Summary**

This chapter has highlighted the benefits of small-scale research within social work education, training and potentially practice. In particular, more in-depth and substantive research with smaller groups, and conceptual, theoretically or skills-centred literature-based research, can help us understand the social problems and issues that we will confront as part of social work practice. There are now different routes that lead to a social work dissertation via various courses, but many tasks and themes within each are similar.

Among other benefits, social work research can offer new insights, and at its most ambitious, research may also support us to become better social workers by allowing us to fully appreciate and understand the social needs that we aim to meet. It should also help us to become more aware of the needs of service users, as well as how best to meet these needs. Finally, qualitative research should also be able to help us to become more reflexive – that is, to look critically at our own beliefs and practices, as well as the activities and principles of related organizations, colleagues, and other professionals. As Lynch (2000: 95) suggests:

> Those who have experiential knowledge of inequality and injustice can ally this understanding with academic knowledge to create a new and deeper knowledge of their world. This deeper understanding can [help us] challenge established ‘wisdoms’ and ‘ideologies’ around inequality and injustice.

Social work research also has some distinct qualities, including its attempt to apply different theories from diverse disciplines so as to understand a variety of social needs. It also stresses the centrality of applied ethics, and most prominently the need to strive to protect and empower service users wherever possible.

The next chapter looks at the overall process of social work research for a dissertation.
Suggested reading


