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# Authors Make Case for Engaged Scholarship in Social Work Research Methods Guide

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**Reviewed by Kala Chakradhar**

*Qualitative Methods for Practice Research* (Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods). Jeffrey Longhofer, Jerry Floersch, and Janet Hoy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 216 pages. ISBN 9780195398472.

*Qualitative Methods for Practice Research* is a pocket book guide to social work research methods, one of a series of two dozen pocket guides written by various authors covering a variety of topics on research methods. This particular book is co-authored by Jeffrey Longhofer and Jerry Floersch, both associate professors of social work at the State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, and Janet Hoy, assistant professor of social work at the University of Toledo. In coproducing this 200–page 8.5 x 5.5 easy-to-carry guide, the authors offer beginning and experienced social work practitioners a way to understand the qualitative research process of knowledge-building and meaningful application to the practice context of which they are a part. This collaborative work also offers academic researchers ways to sensitize themselves to the practice contexts and the stakeholders in the various client systems. The authors make a strong case for engaged scholarship in which the researcher-practitioner interaction is interdependent and there is an ongoing dialogue toward knowledge advancement and mutually beneficial ends.

A search for the origins of the idea of engaged scholarship leads to Boyer's seminal work (1990) calling for a reconsideration of the definition of scholarship in academe. In taking a critical look at the reward system for faculty in higher education primarily through research and publishing, he laments the isolated nature of this academic endeavor. As he described in later years, (Boyer, 1996): "The scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge what anthropologist Clifford Geetz describes as the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us" (p. 20). What began as a serious recommendation for scholarship within

universities to be connected to the realities of the world outside has today culminated in several disciplines working toward strengthening the research-practice interface. The creation of knowledge that can be suitably applied to real world practice settings is increasingly being recognized as an interactive process between the researcher and practitioner through the phases of problem formulation, conceptualization, creating a design for investigation, executing the study, and utilizing the results (Calleson, Jordan & Seifer, 2005; Hughes, Bence, Grisoni,O'Regan, & Wornham, 2011; Kielhofner, 2005; Wilson, 2006).

Longhofer, Floersch, and Hoy, in this innovative piece on qualitative research methods, exemplify this researcher-practitioner partnership and the value of engaged scholarship in social work practice settings. They subscribe to Van de Ven's (2007) framework for engaged scholarship where knowledge is to be coproduced through collaborative work and challenging, differing perspectives through an interactive evolving process called arbitrage. The authors foresee this form of engaged scholarship as ushering in a new era in social work research, interdependent as opposed to autonomous and parallel. Besides the introductory chapter, which sets the stage for the purpose and focus of the book, there are five chapters. A "Notes" section gives a chapter-wise elaboration of some of the implicit content. The book ends with a glossary of the conceptual terms used as well as a list of references.

The philosophy of critical realism is introduced and discussed in detail in Chapter 1 wherein attention is drawn to what goes on in the open systems in which social workers practice. The authors see critical realism as best suited for engaged scholarship. A distinction is made between empirical, actual, and real domains where the real is beyond what knowledge can explain and fathom and is part of the complex

experience of the practitioner's discoveries through reflection in practice situations. In the same vein, the contrasts drawn between brute and institutional (contextual) facts, closed and open systems, downward and emergent causation, and the necessary and contingent demonstrate what constitutes critical realism. In enlightening the struggle that exists in connecting theory and practice, deductive and inductive processes, the concept of phenomenological practice gap (PPG) is elaborated. By the authors' own admission, this chapter makes for challenging reading but does admirably address the limits of variables-based research, especially when critically looking at the process of implementing evidence-based interventions in mental health practice settings. The authors' interpretation of the critical realist perspective to causation in social work practice situations is worth a read.

The second chapter illustrates the use of qualitative methods in projects involving engaged scholarship beginning with problem formulation, framing aims and questions to data collection and analysis. Interspersed with examples from practice situations as well as day-to-day experiences, the narrative offers clarity in understanding the stages of research including sampling, recruitment of participants, and the role of the Institutional Review Board. The chapter explains the nature of qualitative data including use of audio-visual media, describes three analytic strategies (thematic, grounded theory, and narrative), and also offers a simplified introduction to the data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. By providing screenshot illustrations of sample data and preliminary coding instructions, the authors give readers an opportunity to get started right away. All this is brought together at the end with a case illustration of youth and psychotropic medication retracing the steps from formulation to findings.

Institutional ethnography as a qualitative method was developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith in the third chapter. The focus of this method is on the web of social processes and relationships in a practice context. This method specifically lends itself to the study of the effects of policy or interventions where, in reality, multiple dynamics come into play and multiple networks of individuals are impacted in different ways. The application of this method is illustrated by the effects of policy on the everyday experience of case managers and clients in community mental health settings. Coproduction of knowledge through researcher-practitioner engagement and identification of PPG is also demonstrated through the illustration.

Chapter 4 discusses how an engaged scholarship approach is used to adapt evidence-based interventions. The authors offer examples from literature where such adaptations were made to incorporate the strengths and needs of the context, which they term positive variance. In examining seven of these adaptations, the authors draw their inferences on the iterative adaptive process and the methods used. An illustration of a jail setting is used to especially affirm the need to anticipate the "particularity" of the setting and the "nature of open systems" (p. 137). The inevitability of phenomenological practice gaps is underscored and practitioners are urged to "reject the premise that experts make knowledge and transfer it downward" (p. 137).

In the final chapter, the multiple aspects of engaged scholarship are tied together by what the authors exalt as the single most important concept in social work practice and research namely "reflexivity" (p. 139). These "internal conversations" (p. 140) or reflections in relation to the contexts are discussed in terms of how they are processed. In addition seven components of reflexivity suited to engaged scholarship are detailed.

The authors' effort in the form of this concise guide to qualitative research is indeed commendable. The presentation of the rationale to pursue knowledge building in mental health practice settings informed by critical realism and engaged partnerships is a novel perspective in bridging the gap between researchers and practitioners. As the authors envision, this does open up the potential for collaborative research and learning. The real world practice illustrations make for ease in understanding the range of possibilities in the qualitative research process. A unique feature is the inclusion of resource links and references within the narrative of the chapters. At the same time, however, qualitative research today has gained its own level of sophistication such that the initial chapters make for challenging reading and comprehension. Although the authors have made an effort to integrate the concepts in their illustrations, these concepts do beg for more clarity and depth of explanation.

Professional social workers, in their role

of intervening with individual, groups, and communities, are not only governed by the profession's ethics but also by a set of expected competencies. One key competency is practice that is evidence-based and guided by research and in turn informs research (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). This book and its philosophical orientation supports this expectation. Lastly, the companion site for the Oxford University Press Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods offers additional links and resources related to the content of this book (Pocket Guides to Social Work, n.d). Longhofer and Floersch offer readers a good experience in qualitative research and a worthy read in the understanding of the intricacies of the researcher-practitioner interface.

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