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Social Work Research: Meaning, Importance and Scope

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Introduction

Man has always been interested in the facts and events that have been taking place around him. He has been exploring different sources of evidence concerning the facts and events to acquire reliable knowledge about the various aspects of human experience. However, it was observed that personal bias influenced the selection of sources of evidences and that care was not exercised to examine the authenticity of the evidence provided by these sources. The result was inconsistency in the explanation of the same facts and events time and again. Hence, to acquire reliable knowledge, scientists, thinkers and philosophers have used various methods (Lal Das, 2000).

Among the various methods, the method of science is perhaps the most commonly used method of knowing or fixing beliefs. This is because more dependable knowledge is attained through science as it ultimately appeals and evidence and propositions are subjected to empirical tests.

The method of science has one characteristic that no other method of attaining knowledge has – objectivity. There is a well-conceived self-control mechanism all along the way to the scientific knowledge. This mechanism is so designed that it not only controls and verifies the scientist's activities

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and conclusions but it also keeps the scientist away from his personal beliefs, perceptions, biases, values, attitudes and emotions. Thus the approach helps the scientist to attain objectivity.

To what extent is the method of science useful in studying the problems of society? How can we acquire reliable knowledge about the various aspects of human experience? To be more specific how can the scientific approach be of value in understanding social phenomena? In response to these questions our approach would be first, to understand the meaning of science and then to examine the scientific approach, its assumptions and aims and finally to take a close look at the approach to find out how it can help social workers to understand social problems.

Meaning of Science

The word science is derived from the Latin word 'scienta' which means 'to know'. Throughout history, people have been very keen to acquire knowledge by using various methods. However, it was felt necessary to evolve a method by which individual thinking has no effect on the conclusions. In other words, the method should be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man is the same. Endeavours to acquire knowledge, which involved such methods, came to be known as science.

The term 'science' has been defined in different ways. To some, science means an objective investigation of empirical phenomena, to others, science denotes an accumulation of systematic knowledge; to still others, it means all knowledge collected by means of the scientific methodology. Nevertheless, whatever may be the way of defining, science is united by its methodology. Hence it would be easier to understand science if we first consider science as a method of approach, and then discuss its aims and functions.

A method is a system of explicit rules and procedures. Thus methodologically an approach to acquire knowledge which follows certain explicit rules and procedures is science. Further the results – the acquired knowledge are evaluated in the light of the method. The process of study, which involves these steps, is science.

Aim of Science

The ultimate aim of science is to produce an accumulating body of reliable knowledge, which enable us to understand the world in which we live and its ways. First, science describes the various phenomena that interest us, such as: What was the population growth rate of our country in the last decade? Description of a phenomenon is followed by explanation. Explanation answers the question: Why is there a higher rate of population growth in underdeveloped countries than in developed countries? In other words, a scientist first describes the situation and then explains it. The explanation of situation brings meaning to the description. Finally, science contributes to the body of knowledge by way of prediction. Prediction means making inferences from the facts. For example, if the present conditions continue, the population of the country will cross 1000 million by the end of this decade. It is true that the scientists rarely make absolute predictions, they instead infer in terms of probabilities. The final step of science prediction has been referred to as one of 'the most desirable fruits of scientific labour.

What Is Research?

When we observe certain objects or phenomena, often unaware of our biases, we do not question them and so we attribute our observations entirely to the objects or phenomena being observed. In this process, it is possible to arrive at right decision on

the basis of wrong reasons or vice versa. This questions the process of observation. Was the observation error free? Every method of knowing has certain limitations. While observing are we aware of our limitations? Any study to create new knowledge or aims to increase existing fund of knowledge may it be through observation or by some other methods, is called research if it takes into account the biases, the errors and limitations. As such, research may be described as systematic and critical investigation of phenomena toward increasing the stream of knowledge.

Scientific Research

Science aims at description, explanation and understanding of various objects or phenomena in nature and research are special endeavours, which involves systematic and critical investigation. Thus, towards increasing the stream of knowledge now it is easier to define scientific research. We may define scientific research as a systematic and critical investigation about the natural phenomena to describe, explain and finally to understand the relations among them.

Scientific Method

It is obvious that it would be impossible to comprehend the nature and content of research without an appreciation of a method. The method used in scientific research is usually designated as scientific method. According to George Lundberg (1946), scientific method consists of three basic steps, systematic observation, classification and interpretation of data. Through these steps, scientific method brings about not only verifiability of the facts, but also it lays the confidence in the validity of conclusions.

The definition requires some more explanations. First when Lundberg (1946) says that scientific method is systematic observation, he means in effect, the scientific investigation is not ordered, it aims only at discovering facts as they actually are and not as they are desired to be and as such the investigators can have critical confidence in their conclusions. Second, the scientific method is concerned with 'classes of objects' not 'individual objects'. Universality and predictability are other features of scientific method. The method makes it possible to predict about a phenomenon with sufficient accuracy.

Use of Scientific Method in Social Work

Social work primarily deals with human behaviour, which is, by and large, complex and dynamic in nature. One cannot, therefore investigate under guided conditions as in natural and physical sciences. This creates many problems to the researcher such as the problems of subjectivity and individualistic generalizations etc.

The problem arising out of the nature and content of social work do not seriously diminish the importance of scientific method for social workers. Not withstanding the inherent limitations scientific method can be used for the study of problems related with social work so far as it helps to arrive at valid generalisations.

Meaning of Social Work Research

In a very broad sense, social work research is the application of research methods to solve problems that social workers confront in the practice of social work. It provides information that can be taken into consideration by social workers prior to making decisions, that affect their clients, programmes or agencies such as use of alternative intervention techniques or change or modification of programme/ client/objectives and so forth.

Following are some of the situations which call for application of social work research methods and techniques:

- A social caseworker is interested in assessing the nature and extent of the problem of her client who has been facing marital maladjustment. She may be interested in obtaining information about the actual or potential effectiveness of the client. She may also be keen to know to what extent the intervention would be effective.
- A group worker wishes to assess the extent to which the technique of role play is more or less effective than group discussion in increasing knowledge of drug abuse among school going children.
- A community organiser wants to know the views of the community before he takes a decision to change the programme/objectives.
- A director of special school for mentally retarded children wants to know whether group therapy is as effective as individual therapy in increasing adaptability of mentally retarded children.
- A social work administrator is concerned about effectiveness of implementation of new programme launched.

Social Work Research: Definition

Social work research may be defined as systematic investigation into the problems in the field of social work. The study of concepts, principles, theories underlying social work methods and skills are the major areas of social work research. It involves the study of the relationship of social workers with their clients; individuals, groups or communities on various levels of interaction or therapy as well as their natural relationships and functioning within the organisational structure of social agencies.

While on the theoretical side, social work research re-examines the special body of knowledge; concepts and theories, where as in the area of social work practice it tries to evolve a systematic theory and valid concepts, to know the efficacy of different methods/interventions of social work as to search for alternate/innovative interventions and treatments.

Social work research, therefore, concerns itself with the problems faced by social workers. It encompasses those questions which are encountered in social work practices or in planning or administering social work services which can be solved through research and which are appropriate for investigation under social work auspices.

Social work research utilizes the same scientific methods and techniques, as does social research. No doubt, when some (research designs) procedures of social research are not suitable to social work research it would be necessary to develop the tools which would be appropriate to social work research.

Social Work Research: The Process

It must be borne in mind that the process of social work research is not completely identical to social research. In fact, there are many similarities between this process and the traditional research process. The process however, has some additional steps designed to suit the objectives of social work research. By following the process social work researchers are in a position to know precisely what intervention was applied and how much effect was produced. The process also links research and practice.

Social work research starts with problem identification and setting up of goals. This is followed by the process of assessment (or need assessment) of the client's problems. During these initial stages, the researcher strives to obtain a clear and specific understanding of the problem, using assessment tools such as interviewing (Monette, et. al., 1986).

After the problem is identified and needs are assessed, the next step is to set up goals to be achieved. The goals are required to be specific, precisely defined and measurable in some way. The third step in the process is to have a pre-intervention measurement, that is, measurement prior to intervention; the pre-intervention measurement is used as basis from which to compare the client's condition after the intervention is introduced.

Next stage in the process is to introduce intervention. It is important here to note that only a single, coherent intervention be applied during any intervention phase. In the last stage, we assess the effects of intervention by comparing the two measurements, that is, pre-intervention measurement and measurements during intervention.

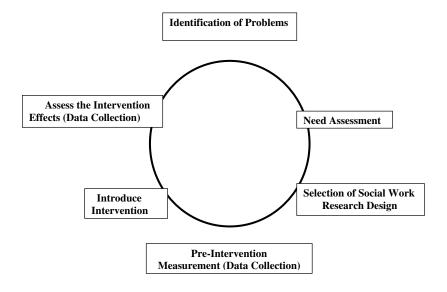


Figure 1: The Social Work Research Process

Relevance of Research in Social Work

Social work is a practice profession. As such, the major objective of social work research is to search for answers to questions raised regarding interventions or practice effectiveness. In other words social work research attempts to provide knowledge about what interventions or treatments really help or hinder the attainment of social work goals. In addition, it also helps in searching for answers to problems or difficulties faced by social work practitioners in the practice of their profession. Ultimately it helps building knowledge base for social work theory and practice.

Social work research also deals with problems faced by professional social workers, social work agencies and community in its concern with social work functions. In other words in social work research the problems to be investigated are always found in the course of doing social work or planning to do it (Dasgupta, 1968).

It is obvious that in social work research the study of a problem is from the point of view of social work and that of professional social work. The designing of research problems, data collection and its interpretation will have to be attempted in a manner as would be useful to professional social work which would add new knowledge to the social work theory and practice and improve the efficiency of professional social workers.

Social work research is regarded as the systematic use of research concepts, methods, techniques and strategies to provide information related to the objectives of social work programmes and practices. Thus the unit of analysis of social work research could be individuals, groups, families or programme of the agency. That is, social work research, typically focuses on assessment of practitioner's work with individuals, groups, families, communities or appraisal

of agencies or programmes that involve the continued efforts of practitioners with many clients. As such, the research design, data collection and analytic strategies in social work research vary as a function of unit of analysis and programme of agencies of social work practitioner.

Social work research is the use of the scientific method in the search of knowledge, including knowledge of alternate practice and intervention techniques, which would be of direct use to the social work profession and thus enhance the practice of social work methods. Social work research focuses on or confines itself to select aspects of behaviour and alternate models of behaviour modifications. Social work research helps to find ways and means to enhance social functioning at the individual, group, community and societal levels.

Social work research lays special emphasis on evaluation. This is one of the reasons that social work research is also understood as evaluative research. Under social work research, varieties of evaluative researches are undertaken. Some of the researches are on impacts or effects, efficacy and effectiveness. Evaluation of agencies and its projects and programmes are some of the specialized areas of social work research.

Scope of Social Work Research

Social work profession has a scientific base, which consists of a special body of knowledge; tested knowledge, hypothetical knowledge and assumptive knowledge. Assumptive knowledge requires transformation into hypothetical knowledge, which in turn needs transformation into tested knowledge. Social work research has significant role in transforming the hypothetical and assumptive knowledge to tested knowledge (Khinduka, 1965).

Not all concepts or theories that are used by professional social workers have been tested and validated. Concerted efforts through social work research are very much required to conceptually articulate and validate the concepts and theories, which will in turn strengthen the scientific base of professional social work.

Identification of social work needs and resources, evaluation of programmes and services of social work agencies are some of the areas in which social work researches are undertaken. Social work research may be conducted to know the problems faced by professional social workers in social work agencies and communities in its concern with social work functions. Thus, social work research embraces the entire gamut of social work profession; concepts, theories, methods, programmes, services and the problems faced by social workers in their practice.

The areas of social work research may be broadly categorized as follows:

- 1) Studies to establish, identify and measure the need for service.
- 2) To measure the services offered as they relate to needs.
- 3) To test, gauge and evaluate results of social work intervention.
- 4) To list the efficacy of specific techniques of offering services.
- 5) Studies in methodology of social work.

Social work is a diverse profession, possible broad research areas could be:

- i) Community Development
- ii) Community Health (Including Mental Health)

- iii) Child Welfare
- iv) Women Welfare
- v) Youth Welfare
- vi) Aged Welfare
- vii) Welfare of SC & ST Groups
- viii) Poverty Alleviation
- ix) Physical and Mental Disabilities
- x) Juvenile Delinquency
- xi) Crime and Correction etc.
- xii) Management of Social Welfare Department and Organisation
- xiii) Disaster Management
- xiv) Industrial Social Work
- xv) Issues concerning Advocacy and Networking

The list is not exhaustive, it's only an exemplary list which enlists broad areas which is very frequently studied by social workers. Again, within one or more problem areas research might focus on individuals, families, groups, community organisations or broad social systems.

It might deal with characteristics of a larger population, and the services available to them.

Goals and Limitations of Social Work Research

Social work research offers an opportunity for all social workers to make differences in their practice. There is no doubt about the fact that social worker will be more effective practitioner guided by the

findings of social work research. Thus, social work research seeks to accomplish the same humanistic goals, as does a social work method. Social work research deals with those methods and issues, which are useful in evaluating social work programmes and practices. It explains the methodology of social research and illustrates its applications in social work settings.

A substantive part of social work practice is concerned with the micro-level practice, such as working with individuals, groups, or a community. Social work research has to take into consideration the limitations of micro level design of study and techniques.

Social work research is basically a practice based research which mostly draws its inferences through inductive reasoning. That is, inferring something about a whole group or a class of objects from the facts or knowledge of one or few members of that group/class. Thus, in practice based research inductive reasoning carries us from observation to theory through intervention/assessment. Practitioners, for example, may observe that delinquents tend to come from family with low socio-economic status. Based on the assumption that the parent-child bond is weaker in low socio-economic families and that such parents, therefore, have less control over their children, the practitioners may inductively conclude that a weak parent-child bond leads to delinquency.

A substantive part of social work practice is concerned with the micro-level practice, such as working with individuals, groups, or a community. Practice based research has to take into consideration the limitations of micro level practice. Accordingly, practice based research has to have special design of study and techniques.

Conclusion

Man has always been exploring different sources of evidence concerning the facts and events to acquire reliable knowledge about the various aspects of human experience. To acquire reliable knowledge, the method of science is perhaps the most commonly used methods. Objectivity is the characteristic of scientific approach, which keeps the scientist away from his personal beliefs, perceptions, biases, values, attitudes and emotions. Not withstanding the limitations, scientific method can be used for the study of social work problems because it helps to arrive at valid generalizations.

Social work research is the application of research methods to solve problems that social workers confront in the practice of social work. The study of concepts, principles, theories underlying social work methods and skills are the major areas of social work research. It also includes the study of the relationship of social workers with their clients; individuals, groups or communities on various levels of interaction or therapy.

The process of social work research has some additional steps which helps social work researchers to know precisely what intervention was applied and how much effect was produced. The process also links research and practice.

Thus, social work research embraces the entire gamut of social work profession; concepts, theories, methods, programmes, services and the problems faced by social workers in their practice.

Social work research seeks to accomplish the same humanistic goals, as does a social work method. It offers an opportunity for all social workers to make differences in their practice. There is no doubt about the fact that social worker will be more effective practitioner guided by the findings of social work research.

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