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### SW 520.01: Social Work Research Methods

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## **SW 520 SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH METHODS**

Foundation Year

Fall Semester 2008

- Professor:** Timothy B. Conley, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., Associate Professor  
**Office:** Social Work, Rankin Hall 115  
**Phone:** Work: 243-5557  
**Office Hrs:** Standing office hours for Dr. Conley are on Thursdays from 11-1. Additional times are available on Thursday but not Friday. Please e-mail me in advance so I know you are coming and to confirm that I am in. Other days and times are available by making an appointment.  
[timothy.conley@umontana.edu](mailto:timothy.conley@umontana.edu)  
**Time:** Friday: 8:10 – 11:00  
**Location:** GBB 205; some classes will be held in the Skaggs building computer lab, Skaggs 214 – see weekly schedule.  
**Credits:** 3  
**Prerequisites:** Admission to MSW program or permission of instructor

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is designed to develop each student's ability to understand the results of empirical research presented in professional journals including practical interpretation of statistics. In addition to developing the ability to critically analyze research, students will develop an ability to design and conduct basic research studies within the traditional ethical constraints of human research while supporting the underlying ethics, values (human diversity, social justice, self-determination, equality) and principles of the social work profession. The implications and impact of research on disadvantaged populations, persons on color, women, sexual minorities, and persons with disabilities are examined. In this learning process students will become familiar with two predominant social science research paradigms: logical positivist (empirical) and interpretative (relativist). Students will explore possibilities for blending methodologies that are quantitative and qualitative in nature to best fit differing research needs.

Examples of research drawn from the field of social work will be used to illustrate selected research methodologies. Course content examines the unique nature of social work practice settings and their potential and limitations for knowledge building through research. Social research designs covered in this course include survey, case study, content analysis, single subject/system, ethnographic, experimental, quasi-experimental, survey, community based participatory research, and program evaluation methods and designs. Through an introduction to SPSS software the course will introduce students to statistical methods that are applicable to these designs. Focus will be primarily on reading/interpreting results and understanding appropriate uses of a statistic. Students will also begin to develop their research skills through the experiential component of this course. The course emphasizes blending the practitioner/researcher role and therefore making research an integral component of ethically informed effective social work practice by analyzing existing data sets and conducting single subject design project.

This course is fully supported by a BlackBoard on-line learning shell which contains all slide shows and other teaching materials. All assignments may be accessed through BlackBoard.

### **RELATION TO OTHER COURSES**

This first research course provides the foundation for the understanding and appreciation of completed research studies and reports through literature reviews and analysis of secondary data sources. It includes an introduction to designing and carrying out research studies. Examples of research studies are drawn from a variety of topics related to other foundation courses, for example: implications for research on policies at local and state agency levels (policy); research methods which may impact the respondent's behavior as well as confidentiality and ethical considerations in the design and collection of data (HBSE I and practice); sensitivity to diversity issues in design and collection methods (HBSE II and policy); how to use research to improve interventions and models of practice (practice).

### **FOUNDATION OBJECTIVES THAT RELATE TO THE COURSE:**

1. Provide students with the analytical skills needed to critically examine the cultural, historical, political and economic contexts that have shaped the meaning of social work [research] and its practice. (FO 1)
2. Provide students with the knowledge and skills of generalist social work practice as a foundation for assessment and intervention with diverse systems and client populations. (FO 2)
3. Introduce students to the integrated-practice model and the epistemological and theoretical issues that inform it. (FO 3)
4. Provide students with the theoretical perspectives and practice frameworks necessary for them to understand and address questions of difference and diversity and forms and mechanisms of oppression, inequality, discrimination, paying particular attention to special populations in the region. (FO 5)
5. Provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in integrated practice with individuals, families, groups and communities, to assess the process and outcomes of practice, and to promote best practice approaches. (FO 7)
6. Prepare students to analyze social policies and their influence on social work organizations, services, and client populations and contribute to their development and improvement. (FO 9)
7. Socialize students to continually assess and evaluate their professional competence and pursue opportunities for self-awareness and professional growth and development. (FO 11)

8. Promote understanding of research as a fundamental component of practice and prepare students to use research to inform and evaluate practice. (FO 12)
9. Develop students' knowledge of key issues in individual and family practice and their relation to contemporary federal and state social welfare policy and programs. (FO 13)
10. Provide students with skills and strategies of participatory, collaborative practice that include the voices of client population in the decisions that affect their lives. (FO 14)

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a beginning understanding of the nature, components, and methods of social science research and their relevance to professional social work practice.
2. Develop a working familiarity with library resources necessary to conduct a literature review relative to the practicum placement/field of study.
3. Thoroughly describe the relationship between theory, research, and practice.
4. Evaluate the ethical consequences of research activities on human subjects.
5. Discuss how unquestioned assumptions about human diversity, which includes issues concerning gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, can cause biases in question formulation, research design, measurement, sampling, analysis, and results.
6. Demonstrate a beginning ability to interpret the relevance of social work research to clients of differing age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability.
7. Demonstrate a beginning ability to critically analyze empirical literature with regards to researchable questions or hypotheses, and selection and implementation of appropriate research methods.
8. Critically analyze research studies at a beginning level in terms of their theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses as well as their contributions and limitations for the field of social work.

9. Demonstrate understanding of different aspects of validity and associated reliability questions as applied to assessment instruments, research articles and agency based studies that incorporate a range of research methods.
10. Demonstrate, through testing, an understanding of the research language defining problem formulation, sampling, design, measurement, data collection, analysis and issues relevant to appropriate choices.
11. Identify and discuss a variety of methodological approaches to research such as case studies, experimental, participatory, needs assessments, program evaluation, literature review, meta-analysis and so on.
12. Articulate the difference between qualitative and quantitative research methods, their philosophical bases, and their strengths and limitations.
13. Use basic descriptive statistical procedures and schematic presentations of data to arrive at conclusions regarding research questions; run and interpret t-tests and basic univariate statistics through the use of a computer statistics package.
14. Describe how research findings can contribute to social work's knowledge base and the development of programs and services that promote social justice in our society.

**Required Texts:** Available through the U of M bookstore

Rubin & Babbie (2008). Research Methods for Social Work, 6th Edition. Thompson Cole. ISBN # 13:978-0-495-09515-6. A single copy of this text is on 2-hour in library reserve.

Vogt, W.P. (2005). Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. ISBN # 0-7619-8855-6 (pbk.)

USB Drive: you will need to have a USB drive with at least 256M to hold data sets and assignments.

## ASSIGNMENTS:

### **Integrating Practice/Research Exercises**

Students will have several opportunities to engage in research evaluation/critique projects. These efforts are designed to assist the student in applying what they are learning through the text, lectures, and class discussion to literature review and practice based research. Throughout the course in class (groups) and individually students will engage in critical evaluation of research articles and processes.

Statistics will be taught and tested for using the software package SPSS; there is no need to purchase the software for this course as it is sufficient to rely on the laboratory computers available through the college in both JRH and Skaggs buildings.

Each student will complete a series of six exams for the course; these will include evaluation of research literature. Understanding the language of research is central to the course and acquiring a mastery of research related vocabulary is key. Hence we will make use of a dictionary for research statistics and methodology. Unless otherwise noted in class, definitions for exam questions will come from the Vogt (2005) dictionary. The exams will consist of matching, true and false, multiple choice, short essay and recall questions. At least three will include critical review of research articles. Others will cover text chapters and term definitions as well as class room discussion and lecture information.

By the end of the course the student will be comfortable with examining, critiquing, and designing a number of different types of research projects that will have direct application in the practice arena.

A detailed assignment and grading rubric will be provided to students regarding all the assignments.

### **Assignments (for Determination of Course Grade)**

▼	<i>(points/percentage)</i>	
Exams (6 @100 points each)	600	(60%)
SPSS assignment	200	(20%)
Single subject design project	100	(10%)
Comprehensive final exam	100	(10%)
<i>Total possible points</i>	1000	(100%)

**Incomplete Policy:**

Late work will not be accepted, reviewed or graded. Missed exams may not be made up. No incomplete grade, "I", will be issued for this course. All students will be assigned a letter grade based only on completed work.

**Class Participation/Attendance policy:**

Students are expected to prepare for (complete assigned readings and assignments), attend, and participate in all fourteen, 3 hour class sessions. Unlike the usual undergraduate format of meeting 2-3 times per week, each single 3 hour graduate class makes up 7 % of the course. Missing any session is not advisable. Missing two classes (14% of scheduled class time) will lower your overall final earned letter grade by one full grade. Students who miss three of the 14 classes (21.0% of class time) for any reason will be strongly encouraged to withdraw and/or be assigned a failing grade. Alternative professional activities such as workshops, other classes or training may be substituted for class attendance only with **prior** instructor permission, documented by e-mail, however students will still be responsible for material covered on that day. Missed exams may not be made up. Please do not schedule practicum activities, work related projects or appointments for other classes or professors for the next 14 Friday mornings. This policy was designed in consultation with the University's Dean of Students.

**Policies on accommodations for students with disabilities, adverse health and critical life events:**

Students with disabilities that affect their participation in the course must notify the instructor at the start of the semester if they wish to have special accommodations in instructional format, examination format, etc., considered. With regards to personal illness, and crisis - they happen. If illness or life events prevent you from attending and participating in classes in accordance with the attendance policy you will be encouraged to withdraw and re-enroll when health and circumstances change and you can benefit from full participation in the learning experience. Excessive absence can not be accommodated in any case. This policy was designed in consultation with the University's Dean of Students.

**SCHEDULE**

In the interest of adaptability this syllabus is subject to revision as the class progresses. Any changes will be 1) announced in class, 2) handed out in writing and 3) e-mailed to all registered participants at their griz-mail address.

**Class# One: 8/29****Research on social work practice; theory, ideology and philosophy of science****Reading:**

Text: Preface/Chapter 1: Why study research? Chapter 3: Philosophy and theory in social work practice.

**Topics:**

Introduction to class/assignments; the importance of research to humane, ethical social services; the nature of reality/knowing and the scientific method; Can we actually quantify theory?!

**Class# Two: 9/5 Political context; ethics and human subjects; role of the IRB; culturally sensitive social work research.**

Reading: Chapter 4: The ethics and politics of social work research. Chapter 5: Culturally competent research pages 97-111. *BlackBoard* document: “11-Point IRB Summary.”

Topics: Racism is an outcome. Introduction to ethical considerations; Protection of human subjects; Slide show: “Children placed in out of home care.” National Institutes of Health research guidelines. Society for Social Work Research (SSWR). Introductions to critiquing social science literature.

**Class# Three and Four: 9/12 & 9/19**

**Methods of measurement: Quantitative methods and statistics (Exam I, start of class Three).**

Reading: Articles on *BlackBoard*: Conley, T. (2001). “Construct Validity of the MAST and AUDIT with multiple offender drunk drivers Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 20 (4), June 2001, p. 287-295. Also: Creating and Validating Rapid Assessment Instruments For Practice and Research: Part I and Part II. Text Chapter 7: Conceptualization and operationalization. Chapter 8: Measurement Chapter 5: Culturally competent research, pages 112-119. Also, appendix D in the text may prove useful for you for the next three classes, but it is not required assigned reading.

Topics: Can we actually quantify theory?! SPSS Lab Skaggs building room 220 (I’ll walk you over on the 12<sup>th</sup> after the test). Introduction to SPSS and teaching method; levels of data & measurement; hypothesizing; validity and reliability of rapid assessment instruments; operational considerations; causal relationships; independent/dependent variables. The culture-bound nature of instruments. Variation. Uni-variate measures of association. Critiquing social science literature with regards to instruments.

**Class# Five: 9/26 Applied statistics for the social sciences (Meet in Skaggs 220) (Exam II, Skaggs lab, end of class).**

Reading: Quantitative data analysis; Ch. 20, Quantitative Data Analysis; 21 & 22: Inferential Data Analysis part I and II.

Topics: SPSS Lab Skaggs building room 220. Alpha reliability, significant tests (p. values), t-tests, Pearson’s correlation

**Class# Six: 10/3 Surveys in the real world**

Reading: Ch. 14: Sampling; Chapter 15: Survey research; Ch. 16, Analyzing existing data.

Topics: Methods of survey research; questionnaires: personal face to face interviewing; mail, telephone and internet surveys; review of Dillman's method; developing questions and questionnaires.



Introduction to single case designs in social work; NASW 2005 Montana survey case study.

**Class# Seven: 10/10 Survey as assessment**

**(Guest Speaker: Kirstin Balow) (SPSS data set analysis report due today – submit as a paper copy)**

Reading: Chapter 15: Survey research; Chapter 16, Analyzing existing data.  
Topics: Methods of survey research: questionnaires; personal face to face interviewing; mail, telephone and internet surveys; review of Dillman's method; developing questions and questionnaires. Introduction to single case designs in social work; Montana LCSW Survey case study; NASW 2005 Montana survey case study.

**Class# Eight: 10/17 Qualitative research methods**

**(Exam III, start of class).**

Reading: Chapter 17: Qualitative Research (General Principles), Ch. 18: Qualitative Research (Specific Methods), and Ch. 19: Qualitative Data Analysis  
Topics: Analyzing qualitative data; naturalism; grounded theory; qualitative interviewing.

**Class# Nine: 10/24**

**Community based participatory research.** Guest lecture by Maxine Jacobson, Ph.D. Reading: Jacobson et al. (in press). Community based participatory research: Groupwork for social justice and community change. Other readings as assigned by our guest.

Topics: CBPR and social work empowerment. Using research to activate community networks. Missoula food survey project.

**Class# Ten: 10/31 Single subject design studies; (N=1)**

**(Exam IV, start of class).**

Reading: Text Chapter 12, Single-case evaluation designs.  
Blackboard: Grinnell, R.M. Social Work Research And Evaluation Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches: Chapter 23: Single-System Designs.  
Topics: Use of single subject designs; (N=1) in social work. Graphing in excel for N1 studies. Additional reading as assigned. Guest lecturer visit Kevin Fronczek: Graphing with Excel.

**Class# Eleven: 11/7 Single subject design continued; Reviewing and critiquing research literature.**

Reading: Kazdin, A.E. (1995). Preparing and evaluating research reports. *Psychological Assessment* 7 (3), 228-237. Chapter 23: Writing research proposals and reports.  
Topics: Using written language to advocate for socially just research

**Class# Twelve: 11/14 Research proposals for practice settings**

**(Exam V)**

Reading: Chapter 23: Writing research proposals and reports. Ch. 6 Problem formulation and measurement; Conley, Gallagher and Evers, (2008) Assessing Factors Associated with the Use of Residential Treatment Facilities for Juveniles on Probation in Montana, Fiscal Year 2007.

Topics: Statistics first: Proposing agency based research; research on social work practice

**Class# Thirteen: 11/21 Social work practice model and program evaluation**

**(Single subject design paper due)**

Reading: Chapter 13: Program evaluation; chapter 2: Evidenced based practice

Topics: Article critique: social work journals. Montana Department of Corrections case study. Can all programs be studied? Impact of outcome studies on funding policy. Agency politics and program evaluation.

**Class# Fourteen: 11/28 Review and recap; case studies in social work practice**

**(Exam VI, end of class)**

**A comprehensive final exam** will be administered during the scheduled final exam period.

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