ROUTLEDGE

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

A GUIDE FOR RELUCTANT RESEARCHERS

SARAH-JANE DODD & IRWIN EPSTEIN

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

This unique textbook explores practice-based research (PBR) using numerous practice examples to actively encourage and engage students and practitioners to embrace research as a meaningful support for their practice. While evidence-based practice gives practitioners access to information about "universal" best practices, it does not prioritize practitioner-generated knowledge or promote new research-based interventions relevant to their own practice circumstances as PBR does.

This book discusses the evolution of PBR as a distinct social work research approach, describes its principles and methods and presents a range of exemplars illustrating the application of PBR within different practice methods, and in different practice settings. The chapters cover:

- identifying the research question in a PBR model
- designing a study and identifying a methodology
- sampling
- literature reviews
- gathering data
- ethics
- analyzing data and interpreting results
- putting research into practice.

Viewing the practitioner as central to the research process, and research as a necessary component of practice, this invaluable book emphasizes the seamless integration of practice and research. It is about research *in* social work practice rather than research *on* social work practice. Each chapter includes an overview, an introduction, and a key concepts summary. *Practice-Based Research in Social Work* is a very accessible text suitable for social work students, particularly MSW students, and practitioners.

Sarah-Jane Dodd is an Associate Professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work and the City University of New York Graduate Center, USA. She is also a consulting editor for the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* and the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*.

Irwin Epstein occupies the Helen Rehr Chair in Applied Social Work Research in Health and Mental Health at Hunter College School of Social Work of the City University of New York, USA. He is co-author of several books and numerous articles on social worker professionalization, program evaluation, research utilization and practice-based research. Having introduced this latter concept into the social work literature, his current interest is in exploring clinical data-mining as a practice-based research methodology.

To our mothers Pamela Julia Dodd and Rachel Epstein

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

A guide for reluctant researchers

Sarah-Jane Dodd and Irwin Epstein

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The suggestion that we write a PBR text originated when Tony Tripodi, former Dean of Ohio State School of Social Work and an eminent research scholar served as the visiting Moses Professor at our school in 2006/07. Bringing together all of Hunter's research faculty, Tony patiently initiated and facilitated meetings, while offering both wise counsel and optimistic encouragement during the early teething stages. We owe a huge "thank you" to Tony for getting us past those cranky yet exciting times.

Based on our early meetings, our research faculty offered a PBR symposium entitled "Meeting the Challenge of Research-Practice Integration: Conducting Practice-Based Research in and with Diverse Communities" at the 2006 Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) conference in San Antonio. Though the seminar was slotted into the last session of the last day of the conference when most conference participants had already left or were heading to the airport and remembering the Alamo, we were pleasantly surprised that so many actually showed and stayed through our two-hour, Sunday morning seminar. Clearly, some research academics were intrigued by our unique orientation to teaching and conducting research.

Colleagues who presented in that PBR seminar and/or were part of those early meetings included Irene Chung, Nancy Feldman, Harriet Goodman, George Patterson, Andrea Savage, Mike Smith and Darrell Wheeler. To them, we owe our gratitiude. As the scope of the project took shape and it became clear that a unified voice was needed most went their separate ways, sinking their teeth into other projects. Still, those early meetings and that seminar helped the two of us to solidify our conceptual thinking. These same colleagues provided ongoing support and encouragement to us as we took the book on as our own.

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Though she lived to see her 100th birthday this year, this is the first book that Rachel Epstein will not have lived to see published and proudly added to her unread pile of "Irwin's books" just under the TV set. She was his greatest booster though some academic antagonists might say precisely *because* she never read them. "Pay no mind to them" she'd say, "they wish they could write that book."

Of course, our greatest debt is to the countless and initially research "reluctant" social work students and practitioners who trusted us enough to let us join with them as they explored their practice questions in increasingly systematic and thoughtful ways. Their practice-relevant studies exemplify PBR, some of which we discuss throughout this book. Thank you.

Sarah-Jane Dodd and Irwin Epstein

Part 1

Introduction to PBR in social work practice

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK'S PURPOSE

For most students, and regretfully the majority of social work practitioners, the words "research" and "practice" occupy opposite ends of a continuum. Indeed, in most students' and practitioners' minds, the terms are generally separated by "versus" – as though they were at opposing corners of the boxing ring.

Nonetheless, the Code of Ethics adopted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 2008 requires that "Social workers should monitor and evaluate policies, the implementation of programs, and practice interventions" and should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge" (p.25). As a result, every NASW member is obliged to incorporate research into her or his practice and ideally to contribute to the development of social work's knowledge base. Whether they do or not is another story.

In reality, compliance with this ethical obligation is left up to the practitioner. And while some social work research professors have argued that those who do not are guilty of "malpractice" (Myers and Thyer, 1997), those of us who teach research but are mindful of realistic constraints recognize that threats and punishments are no ways to win the hearts and minds of our research students as future practitioners. We do, however, think it is vital for social workers, and in particular for social work practitioners to be engaged in research, so that questions can be generated from a social work perspective and explored in social work settings. If social workers do not engage in research then we have to rely on other professions to generate knowledge for us, something that we have relied on for a long time. So our insistence on the importance of practitioners being involved in research is so that our research questions stay relevant and realistic and add a social work practice perspective to knowledge-building.

Consistent with the position taken by NASW is the recently adopted Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards 2.1.6 of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). CSWE, which accredits all Baccalaureate and Master's degree programs in social work, requires that all social work students be prepared to "engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research" (CSWE, 2008, p.5). So whether you want to or not, as a social work student you are obliged to take at least one course in research.

Though the foregoing requirements are relatively new, the aversion of social work students to research is an old story. Despite our capacity to use research comfortably in other areas of our lives (such as when choosing a graduate school, or buying a computer) social workers balk at the idea of one or more research classes. Whether

fuelled by a fear of statistics (Wilson and Rosenthal, 1993), ethical opposition to research requirements, an objection to reducing individual clients to computer categories, resistance to overly broad cultural stereotypes, the perception of research irrelevance or the simple preference to be studying something else, it is safe to say that most social work students are "reluctant" to enroll in a required research course.

Indeed, over a decade ago, Epstein (1987) characterized social work students as "research reluctants". Writing about the social work research requirement, he noted:

> No other part of the social work curriculum has been so consistently received by students with as much groaning, moaning, eye-rolling, bad-mouthing, hyperventilation and waiver-strategizing as the research courses.
>
> (Epstein, 1987, p.71)

That was true then and, as Harder (2010) suggests, it is true today. Hence, those of us who teach research are united in a commitment to integrate practice and research. We differ however in how we try to do that. Some emphasize the ethical obligation to use the most current results of "gold standard" social work research studies so that clients receive interventions that are shown by these studies to be most effective (Gambrill, 2006). These social work researchers are identified with the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement in social work (Kirk and Reid, 2002).

The influence of this movement has extended well beyond the classroom to many social work agencies wherein "manualized" interventions based on prior research are incorporated into how social workers are expected to practice. Although there is debate among academics about how much freedom this gives or should give practitioners to be creative in their practice, manualization of practice has not been welcomed by many practitioners. While they would not disagree with its intent – to better serve clients – they object to the way it encroaches on their professional autonomy and overrides practice instincts (Epstein, 2011).

Elsewhere, Epstein (2009) has been critical of EBP for treating practitioners solely as research consumers rather than as practitioner-researchers and as potential contributors to research knowledge for the profession. Similar to the approach taken by Harder (2010) in teaching MSW research courses, he has written about the ways practitioners and PhD students in social work can "mine" routinely available agency data to inform their practice decision-making as well as to contribute to the knowledge base of social work.

The purpose of this book is to broaden that perspective and demonstrate the many ways in which research concepts and simple and ethically-acceptable research projects can contribute to the quality of your practice as a social work student and as a future professional. In other words, our purpose is to make research more "practice-friendly", help you see it as such and, in so doing to reduce your reluctance to use it. There, we've said it!

At the same time, it should be clear that our intention is not to make research so appealing that you abandon practice altogether and decide to become a research professor like us – unless of course you want to. We've happily spent our careers doing just that and loving it. But in this book, our joint mission is to keep the word "practitioner" first and foremost in every research discussion. For you as well as for us, that rightfully means always keeping your clients' best interests as well as your primary aspiration to be a social worker rather than a researcher firmly in mind.

Given students' research reluctance mentioned earlier, achieving this purpose is a tall order. There are lots of required research texts on the shelves of libraries and school bookstores. Almost as many are in bookstores' remainder bins, on student bulletin-boards and on eBay for resale until a new edition gets assigned. We're hoping that this one is a "keeper".

More significantly, we're hoping that the concepts and techniques discussed and described in this book will become integrated into your practice as a student, as a future social work practitioner and throughout your career. Many of the concepts and techniques have been around as long as we have. What's new, however, is how they are put into practice. That is the essence of practice-based research (PBR).

WHAT IS PBR?

Simply stated, PBR is research conducted by practitioners for practice purposes. The goal is to inform practice and practitioners throughout the research process. Thus, PBR emphasizes immediate practical applications by practitioner-researchers who conduct PBR studies. These studies may be conducted by individual social workers, teams of social workers or multi-disciplinary teams, with or without research consultation. When that consultation is available however, it is fully collaborative rather than dominated by research considerations (see Chapter 13, Figure 13.7). As a result, it maintains its focus on the decision-making requirements, the agency context and existing policies within which the social worker must practice – in other words, the practice reality. In addition, PBR takes into account the ethical priorities of the practitioner who initiates the study.

This sounds complex and it is. In that regard it requires that you, the practitioner-researcher, possess a flexible repertoire of research techniques and a wide-ranging research vocabulary. On the other hand, it is quite simple because PBR is so pragmatic. Just like the time-honoured social work practice principle of starting where the client is, PBR starts where the worker is and asks how research can help take the individual client, the group, the program or the community to the next step. Sometimes this may require some additional research consultation, often not.

We're not talking "rocket science" here. Nor are we talking running lab rats through mazes. We're talking about relatively simple modes of systematic inquiry that will inform and improve your work and your understanding of your work. But while the research itself is relatively simple, the reality in which it is conducted and to which it is applied is complex. Just like the social work reality in which you have your field placement and like any practice setting in which you will work post-graduation, the context for PBR is complex and dynamic.

A more detailed definition of PBR and a more complex model of practitioner-researcher collaboration will be presented later in the book. At this point what is most important for you to understand is that the findings of practitioner-initiated PBR are intended primarily for use in a specific practice and agency context. They may be studies to plan a new program, to better understand and/or evaluate an existing program, or all three. Or they may focus on a single client, a family or a group. The problems or phenomena that these studies address emerge directly from practice and provide "evidence-informed" answers to practitioners' questions. Consequently, PBR

is never about research for its own sake. Hence if you think of practice and research on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy (and that would be good), PBR comes closer to the practice end of that continuum.

Still, once PBR studies are completed, their methods and findings might have application and be of interest to practitioners and researchers elsewhere. That's why some PBR studies begin with a purely local intention and are subsequently published or presented at conferences. All the better when that happens. But they never begin with the question "Wouldn't it be interesting to know?" Instead, they require a practice-based reason *why* it would be interesting to know from a practice perspective, and *how* that information will be used in practice. So, PBR is all about applied rather than basic research. And as a practitioner-researcher (which is how we hope you will view yourself at the end of this book) the application of your PBR studies will be directly to your social work practice.

THE PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER OR THE RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER?

In our unending pursuit of just the right way to integrate science and social work practice, academics have championed several practice–research integration "movements" (Kirk and Reid, 2002; Tripodi and Lalayants, 2008). Their remains litter the roadside of social work research.

Most prominent today is the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement. Simply stated, EBP is about giving priority to those interventions that have been shown to be effective through the "best possible evidence", understood by proponents of EBP as, randomized controlled experiments. While some EBP opponents argue that many significant social work interventions for practical and ethical reasons do not lend themselves to experimental studies (e.g., provision of necessary material services, complex psycho-dynamic interventions, etc.), EBP is currently in its ascendancy in many schools of social work as well as many social agencies. In fact, in many practice contexts, governmental funding is currently also linked to an EBP philosophy.

Still, the roots of EBP in social work run deep and can be traced back to the mid-1970s when Briar (1979) championed the concept of the "scientist-practitioner". Very much like EBP today, the scientist-practitioner as Briar saw it was one who:

- Identified client problems in measurable ways;
- Chose interventions after systematically reviewing the research literature;
- Gave preference to single interventions that were shown to be most effective through research; and then
- Evaluated their effectiveness using a "single-system" design approach.

The latter did not involve classical experimentation but stuck very close to the logic of experimentation. In other words, while all clients received interventions and none were randomly assigned to control groups and denied services, practitioners were encouraged, first to conduct "baseline measures" of client needs over several sessions before intervening to establish that these were real and not diminishing on their own; and second, to periodically "withdraw" interventions and then re-introduce them in

order to establish their measurable effectiveness. Clearly, this approach gave priority to the role of "scientist" rather than to other more service-oriented conceptions of social work.

At the time, many students, practitioners and social agencies rejected this model of practice–research integration. Not surprisingly, it conjured up objectionable images of passionless social workers in lab coats treating clients as experimental objects rather than as human beings with complex problems that required complex interventions.

Today, some EBP proponents still advocate practitioner use of single-system designs to evaluate the effectiveness of individual and program interventions (McCracken and Marsh, 2008). They also emphasize the importance of the systematic review of the research literature by the practitioner or by someone who does it for the practitioner. More generally, however, EBP advocates simply assume that those interventions that demonstrate "evidence-based" effectiveness will be effective wherever, whenever and with whomever they are applied. So, while they do not use the term "scientist-practitioner" *per se*, they clearly give priority to the practitioner's reliance on scientific research in choosing interventions. In fact, they assert that anything else places clients at grave risk.

Our PBR approach is quite different. We do not deny the importance of critically consulting the research literature. In fact, we strongly encourage students and practitioners to consult and critically assess the research literature whenever they confront an individual, group or community problem. However, we emphasize the primacy and complexity of the practitioner's role – much of which extends beyond narrowly assessing, intervening and evaluating client problems. Instead, this book treats research as simply a tool to inform and support practitioner decision-making and client service provision. Hence it is no accident that in our model of practice–research integration the word "practitioner" comes before the word "researcher". As a result, throughout the book we will be suggesting how a PBR approach to research differs from a research-based practice (RBP) approach.

THE "ART" OF STRATEGIC COMPROMISE

Social work is as much an art as it is a science. Although many in the EBP movement would prefer that it be entirely the latter, most practitioners emphasize the former. Similarly, the task of integrating practice and research is as much an art as a science. Those who emphasize the science talk about "translational research" and how to find ways to incorporate the findings of science into practice in such a way as to preserve the integrity of the science (Brekke, Ell and Palinkas, 2007). In that debate, we take a "softer" position, firmly believing that social work can and should never be entirely a science. Human beings, social arrangements and different cultures are just too complex to be reduced to a set of scientific principles, research findings and practice interventions. So, throughout this book, we emphasize the importance of "strategic compromise" in making use of research concepts, techniques and findings in integrating research into your practice.

In our "practice" as research teachers and research consultants, we have found strategic compromise to be essential to our success. It makes it possible to take the best of science but to apply it in a practical and realistic manner, understanding and

accepting its limitations as well as the ways it improves our prior understanding. Ironically, even the most ardent, "gold standard" researchers routinely compromise their research ideal in order to get their studies done. This may involve oversimplifying the problems they study, choosing sample populations that are not ideal, continuing their studies to completion despite significant subject drop-out, etc. Hopefully, they acknowledge these issues when discussing their "study limitations".

Instead, just as practitioners must adjust their practice ideals to the reality of the client's situation, the agency context in which they are working and the social policies that constrain or support their interventions, we consider strategic compromise as an essential tool in improving practice through research. In conducting PBR, it is elevated to a basic principle rather than disguised or minimized. As a result, strategic compromise is a theme that runs through this entire book.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

For obvious reasons, this book begins with a chapter on the evolution and underlying principles of PBR. If nothing else, we try to be logical and systematic – after all, we are researchers. But we may try to slip in a joke or two now and then as well. We're human beings and we want this to be fun for you as well as for us. We're also realistic. Several decades of combined teaching of research has taught us that, in teaching research, sometimes the best student feedback we can expect in our course evaluations is the oft-repeated sentiment "I thought this course would be agony, but you made the subject tolerable." After reading this book, we're hoping for evaluations that contain the words "interesting", "fun" and, most important, "useful".

Following the brief introductory chapter about PBR, the book gives most of its attention to the PBR process – how to get started, how to do it, how to use it. In so doing, the book admittedly covers topics covered in most other social work research texts, such as research designs, sampling, research ethics, etc. Booooooring perhaps? We hope not.

What's different about our book is how these topics are discussed and when they are discussed. So, for example, many research texts and many research teachers begin with locating and reviewing existing research literature. Similarly, EBP assumes that that's where the practitioner begins. But as experienced PBR researchers and research-consultants, we know that that's not where studies begin. Instead, they begin with a practice problem and some serious thinking about how some systematic data gathering (doesn't have to be quantitative, but could be), analysis (doesn't have to use the computer, but might), interpretation (doesn't have to rely on some elaborate theory, or prior research studies, unless of course they help) and utilization (often the most challenging, but that's why you're doing this to begin with) might be beneficial to practice and program decision-making.

What we've just described is the entire process of PBR in particular and applied research in general. So, it's no accident that it's not until Chapter 5, that we discuss the literature review process. Returning to the beginnings of the PBR process, however, Chapter 2 is about how to identify a practice problem for which some PBR might come in handy. Chapter 3 discusses the different purposes of PBR studies, while Chapter 4, on PBR designs, looks at how you might structure a PBR study in such a way as it

"honors practice protocols". By the latter phrase we mean, doesn't intrude on your practice and/or conflict with your clients' needs. (Remember, this isn't about doing research just to do research.)

As we indicated above, Chapter 5 focuses on review of available research literature. Not unlike student course evaluations, some PBR studies (e.g., patient satisfaction surveys) may be conducted and meaningfully used without the benefit of a literature review. But why go through the hassle of developing an original questionnaire when someone has already done it for you? How do your findings compare with findings for similar patients in other programs? How do others translate their findings into practice and program implications? If you are interested in these and other questions, then a literature review can come in handy as well.

Chapter 6 is about what kind of data-gathering methodology (*aka* method) you will use. Will it be quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodology (*aka* both)? Ideally, upon finishing this book and the research course for which you are likely to be reading it, you will feel equally comfortable with all three options and use them as the PBR problem requires. Deciding about which also takes into account the costs as well as the benefits of each, and good PBR involves thinking about how to minimize the costs (e.g., time, money, intrusiveness, etc.) as well as maximizing data quality and comprehensiveness. Here, as in every aspect of PBR decision-making, "strategic compromise" comes into play.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss ways of gathering qualitative and quantitative data respectively. The emphasis for both chapters is about maximizing the quality of the data you gather without disrupting or violating your practice commitments. Here again, the concepts are basic to every form of research and are not new. What's different is how "strategic compromise" plays a role in making decisions about maximizing quality and minimizing costs.

Chapter 9 is about sampling concepts and techniques, which are useful in every study (qualitative, quantitative or mixed) when resource requirements and other practical considerations prevent you from studying the entire population that you are interested in knowing something practice-relevant about. Although sampling concepts and techniques have changed very little over the years, they are incredibly useful and practical. That's why they haven't changed. Computer programs can make certain aspects of sampling easier, but the basic concepts remain the same.

One place in which "compromise" of any kind does not have a proper place in PBR is ethics. Chapter 10 is about research ethics and the protection of human subjects. Schools of social work and just about every social agency have a committee or organizational process to protect individuals who are subjects in research studies. Sometimes these are referred to as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or Ethics Committees or Human Subjects Committees. Whatever their label, and however cumbersome their process, their purpose is very important. This is particularly important in social work research studies, which may be about highly sensitive information that potentially makes our clients extremely vulnerable. PBR is flexible about other things, but it takes ethics very seriously. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, there are ethical ways of conducting research on highly sensitive topics that do not place respondents in jeopardy or place an undue burden on them.

Chapters 11 and 12 are about data analysis that you can do entirely on your own or with a research consultant. Chapter 11 focuses on strategies for analyzing qualitative data, and Chapter 12 focuses on analyzing quantitative data. Both chapters are

written with the full intent that any social work practitioner (even you) can develop the skills necessary to analyze PBR data. This is because, even if you do decide that you would like some outside help, it's important for you to know how and why you want further consultation so that you remain in charge of your study, your data and its purposes.

Finally, Chapter 13 is about interpreting your findings and disseminating them, that is to say putting them into practice and communicating them to others. Sharing your findings with others is a crucial part of the PBR purpose of research that informs practice. These "significant" others or what researchers refer to as "stakeholders" may be other professionals in your own agency or those in other agencies or the profession at large. Chapter 13 also discusses using research consultants in a collaborative manner. Once you have mastered the basic components of the PBR process, you will be able to approach research consultation in a truly collaborative way keeping your research consultants accountable to you and your research purpose. Ultimately then, this book is about empowering practitioners to conduct and learn from research and to contribute to knowledge rather than to feel intimidated by research and/or researchers. Our objective is to help you become more than an educated consumer, but rather a producer of knowledge about social work practice as well. A tall order perhaps, but years of successfully teaching PBR has convinced us both that you are up to it.

Chapter 1

Evolution and definition of PBR

Purpose

This chapter offers a comprehensive definition of practice-based research (PBR) and describes how and why PBR came about. It goes on to distinguish PBR from evidence-based practice (EBP) but in so doing, emphasizes the mutually-reinforcing contribution of both. Both have strengths as well as limitations, and while this book unapologetically advocates a PBR approach, in this chapter we acknowledge PBR's limitations as well as its strengths. In conclusion however, we argue that PBR is a much better match to the values and normative commitments of social work practitioners and students like you than – other forms of practice-research integration. Finally, we suggest that this is also true for the clients and communities that you serve.

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter, we loosely defined PBR as research conducted by practitioners for practice purposes. Elsewhere, Epstein (2001, p.17) defined it more precisely as:

> the use of research-inspired principles, designs and information gathering techniques within existing forms of practice to answer questions that emerge from practice in ways that inform practice.

That's a mouthful, but it contains within it all the elements that make PBR different from other forms of research and makes explicit how this book differs from other research texts.

Working backwards (and this is often the case with PBR), it should be clear that its ultimate purpose is to inform practice. In other words, PBR is applied research rather than basic research – that is, its primary emphasis is on utilization rather than knowledge for its own sake. As a result, it is a kind of research that is conducted close to practice even if its contributions are relatively modest. Something as simple as systematically finding out about the food, program or entertainment preferences of a senior client group may not constitute a major contribution to knowledge more generally, but it may make the difference between group attendance and total washout. Of course, your goals for the group may go far beyond providing food or entertainment, but as a group worker you can't achieve those more lofty goals if no one attends your group.

Continuing in reverse gear is the reference to "questions that emerge from practice". In research language, Epstein is describing an inductive rather than a deductive approach to generating the questions that drive the research. In other words, rather than beginning with very abstract theoretical notions or hypotheses that are tested through research, PBR attempts to answer questions that come directly from practice decision-making requirements facing the social worker – for example, who am I serving and what are their needs? Am I providing the services I am committed to providing? How effective are those services in the eyes of my clients and how satisfied are they with them? Should I continue doing what I've been doing, or should I change?

Perhaps the most important distinguishing element in our definition is "within existing forms of practice". While PBR emphasizes inventiveness and flexibility (some might say it is too flexible and not scientifically "rigorous" enough), the one unyielding principle in PBR is that you never compromise established practice principles in order to conduct research. So, finding ways to conduct research within existing agency rules, client preferences, and practice wisdom is perhaps the ultimate challenge of PBR. The central question that PBR poses for the practitioner is "How can I be more systematic in my approach to using information on behalf of my clients without compromising their wishes or my ethical and value commitments?"

The remaining portion of the definition refers to "the use of research-inspired principles, designs and information gathering techniques" and the rest of this book will tell you what those principles, designs and information-gathering techniques are. Our hope is that you will not only learn what they are, but incorporate them into your PBR "repertoire" so that you can mix and match them as the practice situation requires. It might require a self-administered quantitative questionnaire in one situation or a qualitative focus group in another. It might involve combining available statistical information with individual interviews in another.

Once you are confident in your mastery of these research techniques and you are comfortably grounded in your value commitments, you can use these techniques to reflect upon, evaluate and possibly change your practice, or even that of your agency. Whichever you do, it will now be based more on "practice-based evidence" than on "practitioner intuition" or going entirely "with your gut".