

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH TERMS

Concept	a mental idea or representation of a class of events or group of objects that help people communicate.
Operational definitions	precise descriptions about concepts employed in a study (E.g., “problem drinking” can be defined differently by each reader leading to confusion.)
Theory	a set of interrelated concepts, based on facts and observations, that guide actions and conceptualizations; Provides clues or suggestions for intervention; attempts to organize, explain and predict
Hypothesis	an assumption that is expressed as a statement, (E.g., adolescent males are more impulsive than adolescent females.) Hypothesis is then supported (confirmed) or not through research study.
Variable	a concept that can be measured (age, weight, height) discrete variable presents an either/or choice (male or female) a continuous variable is when there is variation within a range of possibilities (age, weight, test scores)
Attributes	component parts of a variable (E.g., attributes of the variable “gender” are male and female.)
Independent variables	that which you are trying to explain or predict-- the topic of your investigation
Data	information obtained during a study that has not been analyzed
Measurement	the process of quantifying states, traits, attitudes, behaviors and theoretical concepts
Participants/Subjects	the persons or individuals who participate in a study
Scale	a cluster or group of statements or questions that are designed to measure a single concept
Instrument	a questionnaire or test that is usually completed by respondents
Reliability	An instrument is valid when it can be depended on to consistently measure some phenomena. Test-retest reliability is when a researcher administers a scale to the same group on more than one occasion to see how closely the results correspond or correlate.
Validity	An instrument is said to be valid when it measures what it was designed to measure. (E.g., an intelligence test could not be used to test anxiety.)
Bias	an outside influence or prejudice that tends to produce some distortion from what is actually occurring or present
Generalizability	how well the findings from a specific study fit another situation

*Above terms taken from: Royse, D. (1991). Research methods in social work. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.

What is a literature review?

This refers to the bulk of your research study. You must first identify a topic of interest. The act of going to the library or getting on the Web to look for information on your topic signals the beginning of the literature review. You proceed by reading about your topic to determine if there is sufficient information to study. Likewise, if your topic is too general, you may come across an overabundance of information, which means you need to narrow your focus. You want to read about history of the problem as well as current issues related to it. You need to identify relevant theoretical frameworks (e.g., ecological perspective) used to guide your research. At the end of your literature review you should be able to state a hypothesis based on all of the research completed.