Preparing a preface is one of the most enjoyable tasks of being an author. By this time, the book is completed, or nearly so. Although the tedium of correcting your book’s page proofs lurks on the horizon, the prospect is so distant, often some months into the future, that one anticipates with hand-rubbing satisfaction an interlude without the harpies of unfinished composition hovering overhead. Perhaps there will be some free time for recreation and relaxation, but more likely the time will be filled by catching up on other long-deferred scholarly tasks.

Why did I undertake the writing of this book? As a recently discharged army veteran when I began my master of social work (MSW) studies at the University of Georgia (UGA) in March 1977, I came across the writings of social work professors Joel Fischer and Steven P. Segal, both of whom had independently tracked down and critiqued the experimental studies on what was called social casework available at the time. What they found was a shockingly small number of published randomized experiments whose authors largely concluded that social work was ineffective or, in some cases, actively harmful to clients. In
fact, there was very little credible evidence that social work was a useful profession. These compendia of conclusions created something of a furor in the social work literature of the day, a furor with three ramifications. The first and positive one was to recognize the existence of this gap in evaluation research more clearly. This realization enhanced our efforts to use controlled experiments to evaluate not amorphous services (whatever it was the caseworkers were doing) but more structured interventions, practices that lent themselves to being operationalized (i.e., described in a standardized manner that facilitates replication by others and adoption within the practice community). As a result of this initiative, there now exist hundreds of published treatment manuals describing how psychotherapy should be conducted for a wide variety of therapies, including even psychoanalysis. Another consequence was for social work researchers to focus more narrowly on circumscribed client problems that could be more reliably and validly measured. There are now thousands of rapid assessment instruments that clients can complete to facilitate more precise measurements of their situation. Asking a client how they are feeling is good, akin to a physician measuring a patient’s temperature by placing her hand on the patient’s forehead. Using a reliable and valid scale that is completed by a client is even better, as it helps quantify their feelings, just as a thermometer permits a more precise measurement of a fever. These three steps—facing the problem of the lack of evidence that what we did was helpful, describing services more specifically, and defining outcomes more concretely—constituted progress within the profession and made possible the more effective use of experimental designs. Because of this, beginning in the 1980s, the number of papers published annually describing experimental studies in social work increased and seemed to report more positive outcomes.

But there was another, less sanguine, response to the assessments of Fischer and Segal, and that was to shrug off the older studies with negative results and to promote the claim that randomized experiments were much too blunt an instrument to effectively assess the subtle effects of social casework. Criticisms were raised about the ethics of randomized experiments, the applicability of their findings to everyday practice, their supposed impracticalities and difficulties, and their origins in outmoded philosophies of science. There is a word for this perspective, and that is “nihilism”: the abandonment of the position that the methods of science can uncover truth, or even that objective truth exists to be discovered.

I kept abreast of this literature over the years, as I completed my MSW and began doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, then as now, home to one of the most rigorous social work programs in the world. During my MSW and PhD studies I was exposed to little formal course content involving the value, design, and conduct of experimental studies and regularly heard faculty and graduate students disparage the value or practicality of experimental studies applied to
social work practice. Survey research was then the vogue. After working as a clinical social worker for several years during and after my PhD studies, I got licensed and began my academic career as an assistant professor at Florida State University (FSU), followed by a lengthy stint back at UGA and then a return to FSU, where I have been since 2002. Throughout my career I have been fortunate enough to regularly teach social work research courses across the curriculum, including bachelor of social work (BSW) and MSW introduction-to-research courses, MSW courses on the evaluation of clinical practice and on program evaluation, and a PhD seminar on preparing systematic reviews. This necessitated my staying abreast of research developments in our field.

In 1991 I founded a peer-viewed journal, *Research on Social Work Practice* (*RSWP*), produced by Sage Publications, and continue to edit this now highly regarded journal, which focuses on social work intervention studies. My thirty-plus years of editing *RSWP* have given me a firsthand appreciation of the breadth and depth of high-quality social work research being conducted by scholars around the world and given me the opportunity to process hundreds of randomized experiments evaluating social work outcomes. Over the years I have also edited and authored a number of books on social work research, including one titled *Quasi-Experimental Research Designs*. In this book I described the strengths and limitations of quasi-experimental studies (studies involving two or more groups not composed on the basis of random assignment) and many published social work studies involving this approach. I presented the simpler designs and examples first and slowly progressed to describing the more complex ones. I was happy with this book, and after its publication in 2012 I began to toy with the idea of writing something comparable on the use of true experimental methods in social work research. To my knowledge no social work books exclusively devoted to the topic of experimental research yet existed, with the fine exception of *Randomized Controlled Trials: Design and Implementation for Community-Based Psychosocial Interventions* by Solomon, Cavanaugh, and Draine. But I thought it had some limitations. It focused solely on community-based clinical trials, but experimental methodology has much broader applications than that narrow scope, vignette studies for example. It also paid scant attention to the value of posttest-only studies, investigations lacking formal pretest assessments of client functioning that rely instead on the magic of random assignment procedures to ensure the equality of the two or more groups in a study.

Over the years I began to informally collect hard copies of true experiments published by social workers, and as this stack grew from a single folder to several stuffed file drawers, I decided to attempt a bibliography of such works. I combined this with an introductory essay on the value of experiments and how the very existence of hundreds of such studies was an effective refutation to critics who claimed that experimental research was somehow inappropriate
for our field. I published this essay and bibliography (covering publications from 1949 to 2013) in 2015 and, having been bitten by the collecting bug, continued to locate additional studies published during and before 2013 and those published in later years. This mania has continued to the present. I then determined to try to provide an overview of the principles, history, ethics, designs, and applications of experimental designs, a lengthier exposition than my early book on quasi-experiments.

Aside from a couple decades of a priori brooding and ruminating, the actual process of intermittently writing the present work took about three years, aided by a one-semester sabbatical provided by FSU. This book is composed of two major parts: the text itself and the expanded bibliography. I make no claim that my bibliography is inclusive of all published experiments authored or coauthored by social workers, but it is a good start. I am always finding both old and new publications that merit inclusion. Our field’s experiments are published across hundreds of outlets, most outside the narrow range of disciplinary social work journals. We often coauthor our work as part of interdisciplinary teams of practitioners and academics. Most journals do not list the authors’ degrees or programs. The interventions delivered by social workers are multitudinous, micro and macro, and the psychosocial problems and environmental and health conditions we try to help people overcome have a range that boggles the imagination. A large number of medications and somatic, spiritual, and alternative therapies are now being evaluated by professional social workers, in addition to the more traditional psychosocial and policy interventions that form the mainstay of the field. This renders the task of locating all social worker–authored experiments an impossible one (at least with my skill set). But the bibliography has grown from about 744 citations as of 2013 to more than 1,000 by 2023. Near my office computer I have hung a framed print of a painting made in 1657 by Ambroise Fredeau titled The Blessed Guillaume de Toulouse Tormented by Demons. The poor guy is trying to attend to his book while evil creatures clutch his throat and claw his neck in an effort to distract him. At times while composing this work, I would glance up at Guillaume and experience twinges of empathy. Look up the title of this painting on Google to see what I mean.

My hope is that this book on the real-world use of experimental research designs by social workers will drive another nail into the coffin containing the dusty bones of antiexperimentalists. The proper point of view, from my perspective, is that social work research should embrace all methodologies that help us come into contact with nature’s truths. And truths there are indeed. Social work practices, programs, and policies can be helpful or harmful, so we need to know what their effects really are, and experiments are one tool that can be extremely helpful in determining this. Note, however, that saying experimental designs are a good methodology does not belittle the valuable role of
other approaches. In fact, experiments have significant limitations for their use in social work research. They are not particularly helpful in creating new theories or deriving hypotheses from these theories, for example. What experiments are particularly good at is testing hypotheses derived from theory and other sources. The research method should suit the question at hand. If a social worker is conducting descriptive research, correlational investigations, opinion surveys, needs assessments, a client satisfaction study, or risk assessments, for example, experimental designs are relatively useless and should not be used. They are not the best research method in such instances. They are not even a good research method. And the vast majority of social work research does not call for the use of experimental designs. But when one is faced with the task of empirically determining the effects of our policies and practices on objective aspects of people's lives, then true experimental methods have a clear and valuable role. Given the more than one thousand published experiments completed by social workers, it would be foolish to deny this. But there are other tools, such as quasi-experimental designs, interrupted time-series designs, natural experiments, and within-subject or single-system research designs, that may be better suited.

While attempting to rank or rate research methods in terms of their value (some have claimed that randomized controlled trials are the best method), the endeavor to rate various research purposes is even more contentious. For example, it is said that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand the lived experiences of others, usually social work clients but sometimes also caregivers, administrators, practitioners, or other groups. The purpose of randomized experiments is to try to make causal inferences about the effects of social work interventions or about the factors that influence decision-making. I am not at all bashful in asserting that evaluating the impacts of treatments and the success (or failure) of policies and practices is much more important to the profession and society. Contemporary social work smiles approvingly on studies intended to try to understand what it means to a homeless person to be without shelter or what it means to a victim of intimate partner violence to be abused. I prefer and more highly value empirical investigations to try to prevent or stop homelessness or intimate partner violence, research that aims to help people, not just understand their points of view better. For this purpose, true experimental designs can be extremely helpful: to our clients, to our societal credibility, and to our claim of being a science-based profession. To me this is obvious, but while writing this preface I looked up the last three issues of the major journals published by the National Association of Social Workers (Social Work, Social Work Research, and Health & Social Work) and found not one experimental study. I think it is clear that the profession's research priorities are out of alignment with what society actually needs. I hope that by demonstrating via this book that social
work experiments are common, can be conducted ethically, cover a wide array of interventions, and are used with participant populations all over the world, reflecting diverse psychosocial issues and health conditions, that others within the discipline, including graduate students, will be encouraged to undertake similar investigations.

I am deeply indebted to a large number of people who for the past forty years have helped bring about this book. I have had three fabulous deans, Charles Stuart and Bonnie Yegidis at UGA and Jim Clark at FSU, who all largely allowed me to develop my professional career. The large number of past and current social workers who have authored experimental studies over the past seventy years have always been a source of inspiration by enabling me to read and learn from their efforts. These people are far too numerous to list, but their names appear frequently in the bibliography. An academic and personal relationship I particularly treasure is that with John and Lois Ann Wodarski. John was already well known as a scholar when I met him in 1978 when he arrived at UGA as I was departing for Michigan. Nine years later he recruited me back to Georgia from FSU, using methods akin to those employed by Svengali with Trilby. It was a good move. John and I have coauthored and coedited various professional articles and books, and for the past seven years we have coedited the *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*. Lois Ann is also an accomplished scholar with many articles and grants in the field of nutrition to her credit, and the Wodarski and Thyer families have traveled together on numerous vacations. I could not ask for better or more generous friends. My four adult children are all now graduated from university with an assortment of degrees, well launched into careers and relationships of their own, and I am most proud of them. They too have been a major source of inspiration to my career path and a great source of personal joy. More recently a new muse came into my life in the form of Laura C. Nugent. Words cannot express how instrumental she was through her love and encouragement (and editing) in helping me finish this book. Last, I gratefully acknowledge the thousands of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students I have been privileged to teach over the years. Robert Heinlein said, “When one teaches, two learn,” and that has certainly been true in my case. Of particular note are the twenty-three PhD students for whom I have served as major professor. What a privilege it has been to work with them and to be regularly introduced to new fields of social work practice over the years. My gratitude to all of these individuals for helping shape me.

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EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH DESIGNS IN SOCIAL WORK