

One way social work researchers can better understand community needs—and move the field forward

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Researchers are calling on the social work community to begin incorporating a methodology called "discrete choice experiments"

(DCEs) into their research, to better understand the needs and preferences of key stakeholders. This technique is well established in other fields but is rarely used in social work.

The paper, "[How to Use Discrete Choice Experiments to Capture Stakeholder Preferences in Social Work Research](#)," is published in the *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*.

"Social workers need to engage with a wide variety of stakeholders, from [policy makers](#) to the people who use [social services](#)," says Alan Ellis, an associate professor of [social work](#) at North Carolina State University and corresponding author of a paper introducing social work researchers to the DCE methodology.

"But social work, as a research discipline, has not identified a standard technique for eliciting the preferences of those stakeholders—even though this is a critical issue," Ellis says.

"Although traditional survey methods can be used to evaluate [stakeholder](#) perspectives, the DCE is one of several methodologies that were specifically designed to assess the degree to which people prioritize one thing over another. In this paper, we propose that social work researchers adopt DCEs as a robust tool for capturing stakeholder preferences on any number of issues."

In a DCE, researchers ask participants to complete a series of choice tasks: hypothetical situations in which each participant is presented with alternative scenarios and selects one or more.

"For example, social work researchers may want to know how parents and other caregivers prioritize different aspects of mental health treatment when choosing services for their children," Ellis says. "A DCE can explore this question by presenting scenarios that include different

types of mental health care providers, treatment methods, costs, locations and so on. Caregivers' stated choices in these scenarios can provide a lot of information about their priorities."

DCEs were first developed by marketing researchers and are now widely used in fields ranging from transportation to health care.

"We know that DCEs effectively capture preferences on a wide variety of subjects," Ellis says. "We simply want to begin using them more consistently to address issues that are important to stakeholders in social work.

"From a pure research standpoint, having a better understanding of stakeholder needs and preferences can move the field forward by helping us develop better research questions and better studies," says Ellis. "Beyond that, having a better understanding of our clients' preferences and goals will make us better social workers. Adopting DCEs can strengthen the link between social work research and practice—and ground our [research](#), policy, and practice in the values that are important to the people we serve.

"I'm optimistic that DCEs could help us collaborate with stakeholders to effect positive change."

The paper was co-authored by Qiana Cryer-Coupet of Georgia State University, Bridget Weller of Wayne State University, Kirsten Howard and Rakhee Raghunandan of the University of Sydney, and Kathleen Thomas of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

More information: Alan Ellis et al, How to Use Discrete Choice Experiments to Capture Stakeholder Preferences in Social Work Research, *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1086/731310](https://doi.org/10.1086/731310)

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