

# Developing and refining your research question

August 2007

a primer for capacity building in research  
by non government mental health and  
drug and alcohol agencies



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Please consult the press and MHCC and NADA websites for  
research funding opportunities for 2007

Disclaimer: NADA and MHCC provide this information as initial advice only. It is accurate and current as far as authors are aware at the point of publishing. NGOs should seek expert advice on their research designs further to reading this primer series.

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# Introduction

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Non-government organisations (or community organisations) in the mental health and alcohol and other drug fields are usually heavily committed to providing front line services for people living with these issues. This leaves little if any time to invest in research and development (R&D) or research evaluation and development (RED) for strategic program and knowledge development. Indeed, funding for the latter purposes has never before been available for mental health and alcohol and other drug NGOs within recurrent funding streams. However, ad hoc funding can be available under National or State health strategies, one-off opportunities, and NGOs themselves can raise funds for their own research work. Consequently, there is need to ensure readiness and to turn NGO executive and staff attention to research and development thinking and to managing research.

This is the second of three primers in a series. The series aims to assist community organisations in developing readiness to design, finance and manage a research program. The series titles are:

1. Thinking 'research' – key concepts
2. Developing and refining your research question
3. Leading and managing your research program

The series also hopes to assist NGOs to prepare for fostering successful relationships when commissioning research or when initiating partnerships with research organisations.

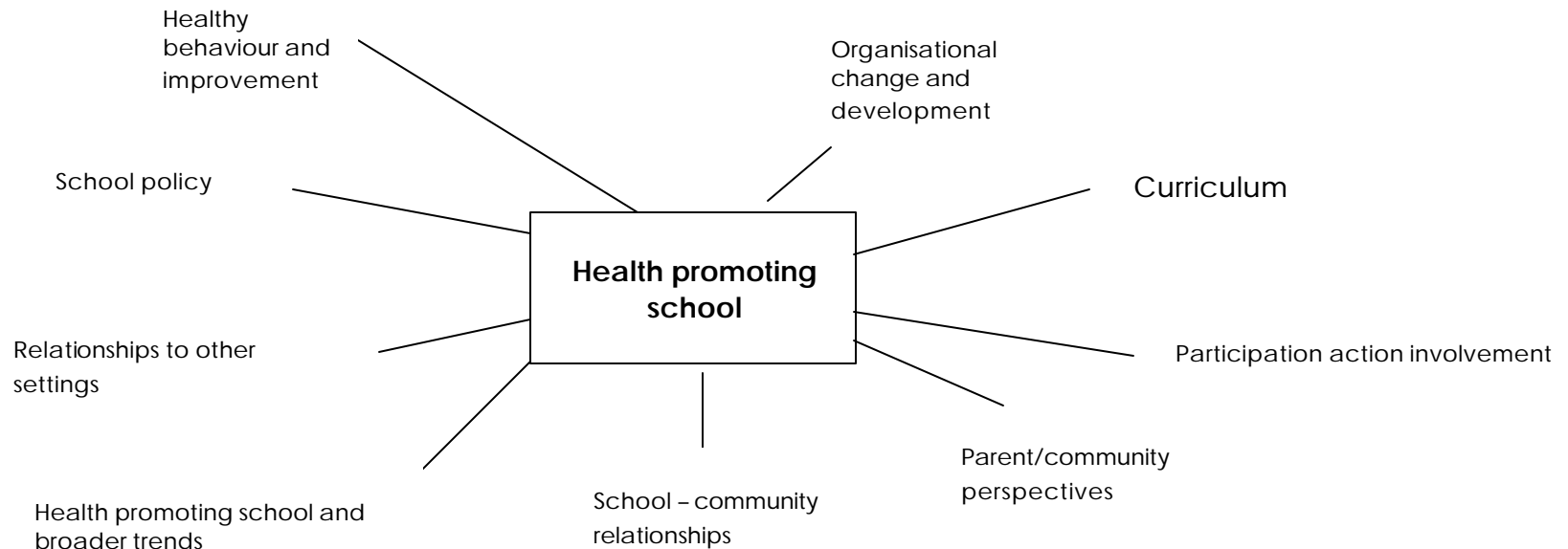
This second primer introduces some example research questions that NGOs may have. They are provided only as an example and it is not proposed that these are necessary or ideal questions. Its purpose is to show how to structure your question, how to think ahead to what the research will find out that is new or different from existing knowledge in the area. It also provides example project titles, and some possible research methods that have capability to answer the question.

It should be read in conjunction with the other Primers 1 and 3.

# Example of research questions possible in a community setting

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Derek Colquhoun (1996) provides an example of the variety of research possibilities that can be generated in the example of the health promoting schools concept. He provides a sort of mind map of the varied approaches and interests in phenomena. It involves community, ecological and the socio cultural context of schools as settings for a broad social view of 'health'. NGOs as settings offer similar research potential since there are opportunities to embark upon an enquiry from client, worker, organisational and community-wide perspectives.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS EMERGE FROM AN INTEREST IN PHENOMENA, FOR ITS OWN SAKE – WHAT INTERESTS YOU?

- What do you know now? What is already published in the area generally?
- Has anything specifically been published about NGOs as a setting for AOD and mental health care?
- Has anything been published about your agency in particular?
- What would you like to find out?
- Do your client's have a view about research priorities that if known, would make a difference to their lives?

EXAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS ARE OVERLEAF FROM WITHIN NGOs AS SETTING AND WITH A FOCUS ON ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS AND MENTAL HEALTH/MENTAL ILLNESS

EXAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTION ASKED BY NGOs	POSSIBLE STUDY METHOD/S	RIGOR ISSUES	EXAMPLE PROJECT TITLE	WHAT TYPE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE DOES THIS FALL UNDER AND WHAT DOES IT ACHIEVE ?
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>1</b></p> <p>Who uses NGO mental health (or specific NGO name) programs and services.....</p> <p>and do they have AOD concerns?</p>	<p>Retrospective file audit using content analysis</p> <p>And / or</p> <p>Retrospective analysis of any existing CANSAS or other routinely-collected outcome data already held by the NGO agency</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Prospective file audit for the 2007-2009 period using other methods proposed above.</p>	<p>Have more than one person review files</p> <p>Pre-define parameters so you search in a structured manner that is quantifiable and qualified</p> <p>Randomise 5% or more files or</p> <p>Select all files (census) for a nominated period (eg Jan 1 2004-June 30 2007) – whatever is manageable for the size of the NGO</p> <p>Consider doing multiple sites if a large NGO</p> <p>Alternatively consider more than one NGO being involved.</p>	<p>Meeting community mental health needs: A profile of service users and their needs from the XYZ Fellowship of NSW 2000-2007</p>	<p>Health services management research</p> <p>Content and discourse analysis method-related literature</p> <p>This research would establish <b>new knowledge</b> about whether the epidemiological research of the general population and on clinical samples of those using specialist mental health services is in fact relevant to NGOs. That is, we know that people with mental disorders often have co-morbid drug and alcohol problems. We don't actually know if this co-morbid disorder group are included within the population of persons using NGO mental health programs.</p>

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>2</b></p> <p>Do clinical mental health services and treatment AOD services refer their patients to mental health NGOs, and if so, which clients are referred?</p>	<p>Retrospective file audit of clinical mental health service files and of AOD clinical files.</p>	<p>Ethics approval of Area Health Service would be required and client consent.</p> <p>A large sample size, min 5% would be required across all acute, subacute and rehabilitation files with a focus of the population with AOD problems, which would be clients under 35 years of age.</p>	<p>On or off their agenda? Are community-based NGOs considered a referral choice by public mental health and AOD treatment providers?</p>	<p>Health services management research  (clinical pathway / care processes focus, continuity of care focus).</p>

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>3</b></p> <p>Are mental health NGO programs aware of, accessible to, and responsive to persons experiencing Alcohol and Other drug problems in NSW (or in Sydney, or in a region of NSW)?</p>	<p>Content analysis of policies, entry and exit criteria, signage, directory entries, membership brochures and publicity of NGO provided mental health services in NSW</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Comparative content analysis with similar sample of NGOs in another state or territory or a sample of clinical mental health programs and services</p> <p>Discourse analysis of the language content in brochures and materials of NGOs with regard to AOD issues and needs. Plus some consumer narrative of their experiences.</p>	<p>Predefine parameters perhaps by comparing to entry and exit policies of AOD organisations.</p>	<p>Is structural reform needed in NGO responses to co-morbid drug and alcohol and mental health problems in NSW: a mix method review of service responsiveness</p>	<p>Sociological research using content analysis, discourse analysis and documentary analysis.</p> <p>This has not been done before. It would provide a service provider audit of the realities and focus of existing NGOs to see if they are already aware and responsive, or challenged and possibly under resourced, or unaware or not accessed by persons with AOD issues and needs.</p> <p>Such research would inform workforce development and service redesign for NGOs to be able to be accessible to persons with co-morbid issues around AOD problems.</p>

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>4</b></p> <p>What is the workforce capacity in assisting people with problematic Alcohol and drug use in Sydney-based NGO mental health services?</p>	<p>Workforce survey</p> <p>Or Workforce snapshot survey on a nominated day including all NGOs in NSW funded for mental health programs</p> <p>Or Focus groups of front line workers from a randomised sample of NGOs in mental health</p> <p>Or Comparative workforce survey of front line worker capacity, training, attitudes and skills from NGOs in AOD and NGOs in mental health.</p>	<p>Sampling of the workforce</p> <p>Demographic description of the workforce</p> <p>Ensuring detailed profile of training undertaken</p> <p>Matching consumer needs or expectations with existing training of the workforce</p> <p>Workforce surveys are notorious for only obtaining about a 30-40% response rate across nursing, medicine and allied health disciplines. Adequate response rate would be essential.</p>	<p>Are we there yet? Front line worker confidence and capacity in addressing AOD issues in non-government mental health programs in NSW.</p>	<p>Descriptive workforce research</p> <p>Social research on workforce attitudes</p> <p>No in-depth workforce data is available currently on mental health NGOs in NSW that provides a state-wide perspective of training readiness and needs and priorities.</p>

