

# Book Reviews

## Social Research: A Practical Introduction

by Bruce Curtis and Cate Curtis (2011)

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The book introduces an ambitious number of research approaches to undergraduate students from a range of social science disciplines. It offers an overview of how social scientists conduct research and while intended to be read as a whole, the eleven substantive chapters are also self-contained. The independence of the chapters hinges on the first chapter which provides an important conceptual framework. One of the strengths of the book is its breadth with coverage of eleven different approaches, supported with a useful glossary of key terms. The chapters cover interviews, life histories, ethnography, focus groups, surveys, experimentation, unobtrusive research, content analysis, secondary research, semiotics and autoethnography. While such diverse methods could appear haphazard and disorganised the authors have successfully integrated the topics according to a number of conceptual themes systematically applied to each chapter. The emphasis on getting started is a strong point, but this comes at the cost of omitting the important steps involving analysis and interpretation. Aspects of planning research and preliminary considerations are well catered for, but this tapers off after the point of data collection leaving little or no guidance on analysis and interpretation of results. Tellingly, “interpretation” fails to appear in the index.

The conceptual framework around

which the individual approaches are organised and assessed include the degree of interaction between researcher and participant, whether cases or variables are of primary interest, whether induction or deduction is most appropriate, epistemological positioning, issues of reliability and validity, and whether analytic framing is fixed or fluid. The chapters are sequenced according to the degree of interaction, with the early chapters covering approaches requiring more intense and direct interaction between the researcher and participants. Interviews are the most interactive, surveys only require superficial interaction and interaction in experiments is highly prescribed and not collaborative. The later chapters do not involve interaction at all since these approaches do not involve participants.

Based on the claim that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is artificial since most methods employ features of both, the text applies the distinction between cases and variables. This divide works well, especially for the extremes with, for example, life history research focussing on cases and experimentation focussing on variables. Cases and variables are closely associated with the basic science undertaken with cases favouring inductive research and variables being linked to hypothesis testing.

The three epistemological frames outlined are positivism, social realism and social constructivism. These positions sit across the realism/relativism divide and some readers will align the third of these with social constructionism. On page 13 the claim is made that “Doing good science is about the rigour of the research, and its two most important measures are reliability and validity.” These features are understood in psychology as important psychometric properties indexing the consistency and accuracy of the operationalization and measurement of variables, but suggesting they are the most important measures of rigour undersells the wider meaning of that concept. Perhaps it would have been useful to have explored rigour more fully thereby placing reliability and validity into a broader research framework.

Fixed and fluid research framings assess the level of procedural flexibility in conducting the research. For experiments the framing is fixed, while for interviews have more fluidity. The introductory chapter concludes with a useful and comprehensive section outlining ethical issues researchers need to show awareness of when working with human subjects. The usual ethical issues are covered (informed consent, confidentiality, debriefing, and harm minimisation) and the important point is made that the best research is collaborative and respectful.

The remainder of this review involves noteworthy aspects, rather than a systematic review of each substantive chapter. The chapter on interviewing covered many of the important points that would be useful for a researcher to think about before beginning data collection. Chapter three deals with life history and includes an excellent section on establishing rapport which could also have been applied to the chapter on interviewing. An important distinction is made between life history and oral

history, and there is very good coverage of processes involving triangulation and data saturation. These points apply well to life histories but also more generally to other qualitative methods.

Ethnography is contextualised by considering the work of early anthropologists who immersed themselves in another culture and sought to understand the phenomenological world view of the 'other'. Such colonising work is no longer fashionable but the approach has much to offer in terms of thoroughness and intensity. Students of psychology will recognise the method as participant observation and be familiar with Rosenhan's famous pseudo-patient study which provides an illustration of such work. This work came from an era where deception were more easily eschewed making it possible to feign mental 'illness' and thereby provide intellectual insight into the complex dynamics of psychiatric diagnosis in the 1960's.

A method more familiar to readers will be focus groups (chapter five) which includes useful comments on the role of the moderator (facilitator) and the composition of the group. Survey research (chapter six) is heralded as the first of the variable centric approaches and is likened to the more comprehensive government census which surveys the entire population. Resistance to surveys is illustrated by the claim that 1.5% of respondents in a recent census listed their religion as "Jedi Knight". While this might suggest resistance to surveys, it may also illustrate the importance of asking relevant questions. Without disrespect to 'believers', it's likely that in increasingly secular societies questions about religious affiliation invite flippancy.

The chapter dealing with experimentation was pretty thin by the standards of methods courses in psychology, but given the numerous methods covered in this book this is not surprising. I would challenge the claim (page 148) that psychology initially developed from the hard sciences such as chemistry and biology. The discipline grew initially from philosophy, but

reached a point where it sought to emulate the methods employed by the natural sciences.

The chapter covering unobtrusive research explains the purpose of this method is to study what people 'do', rather than what they 'say' and this would apply when the research is observational, but less so when the study is archival. Secondary research is more likely to be recognised as a literature review and its importance to the business of science and the logic of examining the literature in order to find fissures in the state of knowledge thereby providing a rationale for further investigation.

Strengths of the book include historical overviews identifying the intellectual roots behind each approach. The future is also a consideration throughout where applications dealing with the impact of technology are discussed. As digital natives become the next generation of social scientists this seems elementary in understanding contemporary research possibilities. While this was a positive feature, the level of discussion of electronic technologies was not that sophisticated or enticing and thus an opportunity to excite future researchers was lost. Even an important search engine like Google Scholar failed to warrant a mention.

Limitations included the two types of boxes employed, practice points and conceptual concerns. While 'boxes' are greatly favoured by publishers on the grounds they can break up the text these came across more as summary points which bore little relation to practice or conceptual issues. Further, there seemed no obvious way of distinguishing between them, reaffirming the misleading nature of their titles. One difficulty in writing a student textbook involves a careful balance around the level of repetition in the text. This work erred on the side of being overly repetitive and while this may assist some, it ran the risk of being patronising in the restatement of key points. Similarly, the text went to great lengths with respect to cross referencing and restating where particular points

had initially been raised so there was, arguably, unnecessary and excessive reference to other chapters. At worst this was annoying and intrusive, but students may find this a helpful guide to where things fit into the overall structure. The 'further readings' at the end of chapters were generally useful, including both classic and contemporary references. However, I wondered how helpful it was to refer emerging undergraduate students to four volume sets as in chapters three, six and ten. Finally, following the last chapter there is no conclusion to the book and thus it seems to end abruptly.

The overall evaluation of the book is positive and the authors are to be congratulated on producing a work that will be valuable for those seeking to broaden their knowledge of social science methodology. And, while it is well written and easy to read, the target audience (students of the social sciences) effectively limits its application to psychology and its appeal to methods teachers. This is especially so, given the large number of excellent methods texts tailored for psychology students.

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