

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

NORMAN BLAIKIE, *Approaches to Social Enquiry: Advancing Knowledge*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, xii, 214 p. + index.

In my review of *The Research Imagination: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, I stated that “while we can debate when it is appropriate to inform students on the limits of our knowledge, putting it front and centre may allow them to engage research methodology as an ‘all-too-human’ endeavor” (CRS online book reviews). Unfortunately, it takes Norman Blaikie 205 pages to admit that “there is no perfect way to conduct research....” He goes on to state that “the researcher’s task is to choose the [research strategy](s) that best fit(s) the investigation of the research problem at hand.” Then why such a long and complicated discussion of the debates surrounding methods of inquiry, if it falls back on the researcher to choose the strategy that best fits the problem? Why not simply provide a framework in which researchers can reconcile their own epistemological views of the world with their own ontological experiences? This question is especially relevant when Blaikie acknowledges early in his book that “the fundamental methodological problem that faces all social researchers is what kinds of connections are possible between ideas, social experience and social reality?” (13)

Blaikie’s first edition of *Approaches to Social Enquiry* was available for over 14 years at the time of the printing of this revised and reorganized second edition. The revisions arose out of Blaikie’s discovery that “the material was easier to digest if presented in a different order” and incited by “further developments in the field” (xi). I can certainly understand revising and updating this text in response to the latter necessity, but I disagree with his assumption that a different ordering of content made anything easier to digest. Part of the problem arises from Blaikie’s writing style which can border on Parsonian at times. His use of unique concepts – which do help to ensure that they are clear, concise and most importantly, consistent – requires a perceptible shift in thinking about what might already be quite familiar. I did need to refer back to his definitions until they felt comfortable and was then able to proceed with the difficult task of understanding the presentation of “research – problems, questions, strategies, stance, and paradigms” before tackling the “status of knowledge, research paradigms and research strategies” in the first chapter alone. This was no small or easy task and I empathize with any student tackling this book without sufficient background to understand the subject-matter. Therein the problem with the re-organization of the topics: it is the later chapters which provide the necessary background to completely understand the earlier ones.

Once I did progress past the first three chapters, the material was familiar, much more clearly presented and greatly appreciated. The material and subject-matter

are no less complex, but Blaikie seems to have made a greater effort to be concise and cogent. Again, the problem of organization became apparent: Blaikie has put a number of perspectives under various categories and then often enters into an internal debate about who is saying what about our social world. Yet the discussion about why the debate exists is not necessarily enlightening. Blaikie does, at times, want to engage his colleagues in detailed deliberations, but then recognizes that the utility of such debates may be marginal to students who are just learning about methodological problems. As a result, they are at times shallow; and, without sufficient room to explicate and expand the background information, they are only marginally pedagogical. As an aside, Blaikie does make reference to a companion text, *Designing Social Research (2000)*, which the second edition of *Approaches to Social Enquiry* is “designed to complement and dovetail with” (2) but which also seems to imply that a fuller appreciation of these topics and debates may be gleaned by reading both treatments together.

Blaikie is very knowledgeable and *Approaches to Social Enquiry* is very informative; however, the topics contained in this book may have been more accessible if they had been structured as discrete chapters. For example, the presentation and discussion of each paradigm could have begun with a general background, epistemological and ontological perspectives, issues and debates, and then proceed to internal and external criticism. Students would then see one paradigm outlined from start to finish without trying to carry forward an idea which made reading this text more difficult than it needed to be.

One glaring lacuna in *Approaches to Social Enquiry* is the absence of significant social theorists/researchers such as Howard Becker (symbolic interactionism), Erving Goffman (dramaturgy and frame analysis) and Michel Foucault (archeology and genealogy). Readers may argue that these individuals and their contributions may be subsumed under specific paradigms such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology, but it is the nature of their research that is enlightening when a student is trying to determine the “how to” of social research. In this respect, Becker and Goffman provide some of the most engaging and informative entries into “doing” social research, while Foucault consistently challenges us with approaches that typically disrupt our taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves and our social world. Instead, Blaikie presents “complexity theory” as the potential solution to these debates, yet fails to address the very question that his work posits: “Will this methodology actually address this research problem?”

This presents another question that Blaikie has not raised: Is the purpose of research to answer questions or to develop better research questions? If we believe that knowledgeable human agents do learn, evolve or adapt, then our understanding gleaned from research done today is still relevant in the future. Thus by changing the focus from “obtaining an answer” to one that “seeks a better question,” we acknowledge the evolving nature of human society even when it seems to be so predictable at times. Therefore, if we teach students to think through their own “theories” for what they observe (something Blaikie does touch upon but then abandons) and ask themselves what they really hope to achieve if they can “know this knowledge,” then they can become researchers

who recognize the “all-too-human” nature of their social world and social science research itself.

In the end, Blaikie’s second edition of *Approaches to Social Enquiry* has a lot to offer despite its dense writing style, tendency to focus on debates rather than pedagogy, and the fact that its accessibility is somewhat more of a wish than a reality. I would hesitate to toss this book at undergraduate students without providing a thorough understanding and sufficient support to see them through it. Unfortunately, by that point of understanding, this book becomes somewhat superfluous: it is not clear and complete enough to stand alone as a pedagogical tool, and the debates are not fully explored and examined to stand alone on that quality either. If you are going to use this text, my recommendation is to reread the first three chapters after you have read the rest of the book. Despite what Blaikie believes regarding his re-organization of this text, the background understanding does help to appreciate his efforts in the first three chapters – it is that part of *Approaches to Social Enquiry* which is worth exploring and was most appreciated by this reviewer.

Michael J. Bergob, *Consultant, Comox, BC.*