

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PAUL S. GRAY, JOHN B. WILLIAMSON, DAVID A. KARP, and JOHN R. DALPHIN, *The Research Imagination: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, xxii + 444 p., index.

I have to admit that I was looking forward to reviewing this book. Finally, I thought, someone has utilized C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" in developing a methods text. The authors make an effort throughout their writing to encourage students to use "imagination" in their research, but they do not emphasize the importance of understanding the intersection of the individual, structure, and history in society; more precisely, that people make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing.

It is not until the epilogue that the necessity of a sociological imagination is actually discussed in depth. The authors then note that:

Human beings are continuously rearranging their social worlds. We simply do not respond in completely predictable ways to the situations in which we find ourselves.... Individuals possess a certain plasticity that allows them to respond creatively to their environments. The meaning of events, people, objects and institutions can change over time.... In short, human activity and hence the social world are continually in a state of process, a state of production.... Social scientists must be prepared to use their imagination, to alter their research theories and their methods, just as people alter other views and perceptions of the world (435).

Students should be encouraged to read this first – and the authors should consider placing it at the beginning of the text – in order to prepare them for the reality that all social science research has limits which cannot be overcome by simply gathering more data or developing more complex statistical analyses.

This text provides an extensive overview of research methodologies in the social sciences, although the main focus is on sociology (all the authors are sociologists). The first five chapters are introductory, and outline the research process, theory and method, research design, measurement, and ethical and political issues. Six chapters are quantitative while 4 chapters are qualitative, and the remaining 3 chapters combine both approaches. The inclusion in an introductory text of chapters on intensive interviewing,

comparative research methods, and evaluation research is to be commended. I was not introduced to these methods until graduate studies.

One aspect of the research process that was neglected, however, is a discussion of how to perform a literature review. Readers may respond that it is a natural part of learning how to write expository prose, but students need to be taught how to systematically organize literature in order to demonstrate a specific history of thought, and to build an argument or counter-argument. Perhaps most important, a well-considered and constructed literature review indicates where a lacuna exists in the research and demonstrates why it should be investigated further.

I was very impressed with the way the individual chapters are structured. Students can finally toss their ubiquitous little yellow highlighter pens because anything they need to know is presented in bold or italics. The definitions are clear and concise for the most part and each chapter has a brief annotated bibliography of suggested readings, along with a list of key terms. There are pedagogical exercises at the end of each chapter to stimulate further thought and a list of references used within each chapter. The authors also include very useful and informative supplemental websites to further the educational experience of students. Once a chapter has been read, students can access further information or engage interactive web-media to enhance their knowledge.

*The Research Imagination* is extensive, and suffers somewhat for its efforts. At 444 pages it is already a substantial tome for a full-year course. For an introductory half-semester course it would simply be underutilized or overwhelming. By covering all of the bases of social science research, the authors are unable to examine them intensively, although they do provide sufficient background and most issues and debates are touched upon. For example, the chapters on quantitative methodology provide an excellent grounding in sampling, survey methodology, scale and index construction, and both bi- and multi-variate statistical analyses.

As expected, it is in the chapters on qualitative methodology that the authors are most reflective. They do acknowledge the postmodern debates regarding the limits of social science research by including discussions of these topics in three chapters. However, it is the chapter by Karen Bettez Halnon on feminist research methods that most consciously considers the limits of research beyond issues of simple data gathering. The feminist chapter was delightfully introspective – “Why Bother Using Feminist Methods?” – and provocative – “Can Men Do Feminist Research?”

The section dedicated to Sandra Harding’s critique of scientific objectivity (based on her 1991 book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives*) deals with an issue that should be front and centre in any textbook on social science research methods. Harding says we must forgo “weak objectivity based in the myths of value-free objectivity, impartial and disinterested science” in favour of “reflexivity; scientists must position themselves as an object of inquiry” (224). The distinguishing

feature between weak and strong objectivity is that the latter “admits to cultural values and interests of researchers...” (224). Why else, indeed, would we engage in *social* research?

Another consideration is cultural. If you are teaching in an American institution of higher learning, this is an excellent choice for courses in social science research. However, at a similar Canadian institution, the emphasis on only American-based cultural, social, economic, and political examples may garner some complaints from students. But this is not a problem with the research literature used to teach the fundamentals of methodology. Indeed, the exclusive use of American examples in the discussions, to elaborate and situate concepts in “real lived experiences,” would seem somewhat foreign to Canadian students.

The authors have done an excellent job in writing an accessible book which provides the necessary knowledge to instruct students in social science research and encourages students to continue the search for knowledge outside the text itself. However, based on the American-centered content, I hesitate to recommend this text for Canadian colleges and universities. I also believe that the trend toward covering all the bases and combining qualitative and quantitative research methods in one text does neither complete justice.

Finally, 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, rather than one that is mechanistic and soulless. People do make their own history under conditions that they do not choose, and that understanding, as the authors demonstrate in their epilogue, should inform both methodological pedagogy and actual research. *The Research Imagination* takes an important step in that direction, and can be a useful resource in American-based social science research courses. A similar text with Canadian content would be very welcome.

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