

Research in practice

Book review

Terre Blanche, M and Durrheim, K (eds) (1999) **Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences**. Cape Town: UCT Press.
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This marvellous book performs a double subversion of “methodology” for psychology students. First of all the book is a counterweight to the hegemony of US American psychology and its imitators in Europe. One of the little cracker quotes in the margin reminds us, for example, that the US Defence Department employs more psychologists than any other company or organisation in the world (p198). It is very difficult to find psychology textbooks that are not saturated with US American values and advertisements for particular culturally-specific kinds of psychology and psychopathology. **Research in practice**, then, ensures that the usual US publisher’s ruse of binding in some extra pages about the part of the world it hopes to peddle its wares to is thoroughly addressed. In this book we have hundreds of examples specifically about South Africa, ranging from the discussions of representation (of atlas projections of the world in which the size of Africa is diminished or emphasised) to arguments about how representations are made (of experiences of health among mineworkers in Carletonville). There is a deliberate localisation of research concerns, and so the concerns of South African students are hooked all the way through.

The second aspect of the subversion is the way that issues of representation and interpretation are unleashed from the domain of “qualitative” research, and they come to pervade the whole text. Methodology is so crucial here because the discipline of psychology has been organised around methodological questions rather than substantive theoretical frameworks for most of its history. The question that has driven psychologists has been not so much how behaviour and mental process should be conceptualised but how they may be rendered visible. The neat divisions marked, as they usually are in methods books, by chapters about “quantitative measurement” or “interpretive methods” are dissolved in this book as each aspect of “method” is made to meet the real world. The importance of contextualised practice is highlighted not only in discussions of participatory action research (which, as a margin note on p228 points out, “is not a Euro-American import”) or participatory rural appraisal (which permits

theoretical issues of the “epistemological function of distancing” to be addressed, p404). It is also explicit in discussions of “critical-emancipatory” approaches that are introduced in the context of “programme evaluation” (which does not usually invite “critical” study in psychology).

There is, however, a risk in presenting a text devoted to methodology in psychology, because precisely by playing into the answers that the discipline presupposes as the founding rationale for its existence - “how should individuals be observed, measured and classified” - we might lose sight of the political stakes there are for psychologists when they avoid conceptual issues. Not only does “methodolatry” (one of the “common analytic errors” listed on p166, and quite rightly so) play a game by rules that critics need to wary of, but it threatens to marginalise the role of *theoretical* reflection on what the game is about.

There are odd parts of the book which do seem to sideline theory, and perhaps the fact that the book is “edited” rather than smoothed into one seemingly coherent text is an advantage here. Otherwise the idea of “cleaning the data” described on p101 would throw a disturbing Harvey Keitel shape shadow from **Pulp Fiction** over the rest of the book. So, when “grounded theory” is adduced as a framework to “induce themes” (p141), this sits uneasily with the warning that a “common analytic error” is simply to describe themes (p168). In fact, theory as such tends to be effaced in favour of “method”, and it is not enough simply to gesture toward the ideal of “balancing” the two (as on pp404-405). Rather curiously, “theoretical approaches” are discussed in most detail where they are glossed as “standpoint methodologies” in chapter 23 (and if the book really is so radical, why would it be necessary to hive off “Marxist, feminist and black scholarship perspectives” into their own chapter?).

There are some pedagogical devices in the book that may backfire. The invitation to the reader to say what “paradigm” they subscribe to could have the effect of *fixing* the reader rather than opening up possibilities for them and shifting them from the place they think they are (or the very idea that they should subscribe to one place or one identity at all). The injunction to consider the “costing” of research (p57) also binds the reader into a certain kind of research enterprise, and this is left unexamined in other chapters in the book. Sometimes things are not as they seem, as when Tallis is quoted on p149 as if he is subscribing to a social constructionist perspective, when he is actually attacking that perspective (he refers to the “vast inverted pyramid of discourse” as “poised on the tiny apex of experience” precisely to privilege experience and to discredit those who only gaze at the “pyramid”). And is not the “logocentrism” described on p155 an always already *mediated* access to the world through the “logos” or “word” (and us such eminently deconstructable) rather than the emblem of immediate presence?

The book also asks a lot of a student reader on occasions, as when they are asked to “design a website” on p187 (which is a task that surely requires some reflection on the way different modes of representation construct their objects in ways that require theoretical scrutiny), and when they are asked “how does this picture make you feel?” on p295, but then left to it without any guide as to how they might work up that account, or reflect on it, or draw out lessons for how readings of pictures might be made. Cross-referencing from chapter to chapter sometimes does the trick (and in this last case it

would have been easy to point the reader back to the semiotic studies elsewhere in the book).

Back to that double subversion that **Research in practice** performs. First, the book is rooted in the South African context. But something more interesting is also going on. For at the very moment that a range of different methodological frameworks are teased out, explained and explored in the real world, the book becomes an instrument that is not at all only of use to South African researchers. This book will have an appeal to any researcher in the real world *anywhere in the world* who has been reflecting critically on what on earth the value is of ostensibly dull things like “research design”, “programme evaluation” or “multivariate data analysis”. The referencing of internet resources - ranging from the TRC materials listed on p154 to help with postmodern theory signalled on p474 - means that the book is also an accessible meaningful guide for a student with a computer wherever they are. If UCT Press gets its marketing right this book could find an audience in the US among critical researchers, and I know already there are psychology students in Europe who will be learning something about their own contexts by reading about these examples from what seem at first sight to be so far away.

Secondly, the book dissolves distinctions between methodological traditions - “quantitative” and “statistical” measures versus “interpretive” and “social constructionist” explorations - that have bedeviled psychology, but it does so by making all this psychological stuff work in the broader domain of the *social sciences*. I have laboured “psychology” in this review partly because I am writing for a psychology journal. But what “psychology” actually is needs to be subject to question. And **Research in practice** puts psychology on the spot by making us see action and experience in the world and how we might examine it as the priority so that the rather parochial concerns of the “psychologists” with what they think the individual is can become a topic rather than an unexplicated assumption.

In sum, the book lays the ground for *critical* reflection on the discipline of psychology rather than mere methodology alone, and on more ground in the world than at first would appear to be the case. The introductory lists of aims for each chapter, the exercises and the boxes all make this an all the more enjoyable book to read. The contributors to the different chapters are, on occasion, identified by photographs where it will enable the reader to engage further with the particular kinds of work they are describing. The editors of **Research in practice** are also pleasingly pictured in the second and third prints on p8, where you will also find this reviewer beaming at them from the photograph to the left.