

## **METHODS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, AMERICAN-STYLE**

### **Book review**

Sansone, C, Morf, C C & Panter, A T (2004) **The Sage handbook of methods in social psychology**. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage. ISBN 0-7619-2535-X. Pages 528.

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It is an ambitious project to collate a handbook of methods in social psychology. First, there is the difficulty of defining “social psychology”, and second there is the difficulty of determining what (and whose) methods form the core of social psychological theory and practice. To make matters more difficult, the editors know that their selection of materials may both emphasise existing methodological hegemonies and determine, to some extent, which emerging methodologies may gain entry to the methodological corpus. The editors of this volume are conscious of their role in defining the standards of acceptable practice in the field, and emphasize two general principles that have guided their selection of material: firstly, they stress the importance of researchers selecting suitable (and, if necessary, innovative) methods and to encourage design coherence between research problems, specific research questions, methods and data. They argue that the constraints of everyday research practice often result in researchers selecting research questions based on familiar methodologies and they aim to provide a library of methods to encourage researchers to select methodologies to address pressing questions, rather than generating questions that are easily answered using familiar methodologies. Secondly, they aim to encourage innovations in research methods by including interdisciplinary methods and novel ways of applying conventional social psychological methods.

In a sense, it is as ambitious to critically review a book such as this as it is to write or edit one. The reviewer, like the editors and authors, practices social psychology in a particular context and has favoured theoretical and methodological leanings. Moreover the reviewer cannot claim to be an expert in the various methodologies covered in the handbook or to be a better judge of the state of the field than the three eminent editors. However, the reviewer can comment on two important features: firstly, on the extent to which the handbook achieves the stated aims of the editors and, secondly, on its local relevance.

The book has four substantive sections. The first, "Fundamental issues in social psychological research", contains chapters on methodological assumptions of methods in general use, ethical issues in social psychological research and a chapter on developing a program of research. It is in this section that the North American focus of the handbook becomes apparent. The authors of the review of methodological assumptions in contemporary social psychology admit that "identifying who social psychologists are is tricky" but nevertheless select "researchers belonging to professional societies such as the Society for Experimental Social Psychologists, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and Division 8 of the American Psychological Association" (p20) as a datum for the state of the field. While they are aware that "these individuals are mostly located in North American psychology departments" (p20) they do not acknowledge the thriving social psychology academy in Europe, Australia, South Africa or anywhere else. Nevertheless, as a review of North American social psychology, it is insightful. The chapter on ethics similarly focuses on the North American (and particularly the US) context and discusses the selection of methods and data in the context of US governmental regulations and APA guidelines with particular reference to the role of deception in social psychological research. The chapter on developing a programme of research is written with the difficulties of achieving tenure in the North American college system in mind. Again, while these chapters address issues that are universally relevant, they do so with a local focus that may be somewhat alienating for non-North American readers.

The second section, "Design and analysis", can really be considered the heart of this handbook. While the choice of material is somewhat constrained by the North American focus of the book, these chapters offer an excellent review of some key issues in social psychological research design. A subsection of three chapters focus on achieving designs that are sensitive to heterogeneity of populations, particularly with reference to potential individual differences and culture. A subsection of four chapters cover operationalizing constructs, including the construction and evaluation of quantitative measures, the use of qualitative data, an insightful chapter on the use and usefulness of implicit measures and a thought-provoking chapter on mediated and moderated effects. Pleasingly, many contributions to this handbook are not simply "cookbooks" that explain how to reliably replicate a method, but adhere to the editor's principle that contributors articulate the influence of underlying philosophies on method and therefore on the potential results. The final subsection, titled "Research designs: Deciding the specific approach ...", contains four chapters that cover specific research designs, namely experimental methods, quasi-experimental and correlational designs, within-subjects and longitudinal experiments and "quantitative research synthesis" (i.e. meta-analysis) and one that discusses "measuring individuals in a social environment". While none of the methods presented are innovative or new, they are discussed in a way that makes them accessible to unfamiliar readers and present recent advances that will be useful to seasoned researchers.

The content of the remainder of the handbook is less clearly related to the core aims of the editors. Part IV is titled "emerging interdisciplinary approaches", but contains only three chapters, covering social psychological research on the internet, social neuroscience and a developmental approach to social psychological research. While each chapter is well written, interesting, and important, this seems to be a rather thin list

of interdisciplinary approaches in social psychology. Indeed, the chapter on internet research is not “interdisciplinary” at all, but rather a (useful) guideline for an emerging context for data collection.

Part V is titled “The application of social psychology and its methods to other domains” and provides guidelines for, and encourages the application of, social psychology in the domains of program evaluation and action research, health behaviour research, micro-organizational behaviour and educational settings. Once again, this seems to be a thin list of domains in which social psychology has applicability. The chapters are well-written and very useful, but hardly seem to scratch the surface of the section heading.

So, the question remains: does this handbook address the editors’ stated aims? Their first aim is to provide a library of mainstream and novel methods to challenge the orthodoxy that conventions of method may hold over social psychological research and practice. While the goal is admirable, the scope of these chapters falls short of addressing it. The most substantial part of the volume (section II) addresses methods that are generally familiar to most North American social psychologists, although recent advances in these orthodox methods are covered admirably. Chapters in other sections of the book seem to be included on a somewhat ad-hoc basis and do not address the editor’s primary goal in any systematic way. The most notable gap in coverage is that qualitative methods receive only cursory attention (see chapter 8). Only interpretive (almost positivist) approaches to qualitative data analysis are discussed and more avant-garde approaches such as discourse and conversation analysis are entirely absent. As a result, many methods common in social psychology in the rest of the world (i.e. Europe, Australia, South Africa etc.) are overlooked. As a collection of methods, then, this volume is firmly located in the North American social psychological milieu and is unashamedly inward-looking. While the chapters will be very useful to non-North Americans using positivist methods, they offer little help for North Americans trying to follow advances in social psychology in the rest of the world.

The editors’ aim of encouraging design coherence and the practice of selecting methods to match research problems rather than vice versa has similarly only been partly addressed. While providing a library of methods certainly may extend the range of methods available to a researcher, there is little meta-discussion of the process of seeking out methodology that “fits” a particular research problem. It is left to the reader to determine the types of research problem that can be addressed by the various methods presented and, as a result, a researcher looking to match a suitable method to a pressing research problem would need to read the entire volume in order to determine which of the methods, if any, may be relevant. A discussion of method selection in flowchart format would have been a useful step in achieving this aim.

The editors’ third goal is to encourage innovations in method by including interdisciplinary methods and innovative applications of conventional methods. Again the handbook has mixed success in fulfilling these goals. Many of the chapters present cutting-edge innovations in important methods in social psychology and therefore encourage researchers to take up innovations in the field more rapidly. In this sense the handbook is successful. However, the section of “interdisciplinary methods” is insubstantial, somewhat ad-hoc, and falls short of the editors’ goals.

In conclusion, although the volume falls short of achieving the editors' ambitious goals it is still an excellent library of methods for researchers interested in applying methods in vogue in North American social psychological circles. It does an excellent job of introducing key methods and presenting recent innovations therein. However, non-North American readers may find the volume parochial in style and scope. The handbook falls far short of providing a library of conventional and innovative methods in social psychology worldwide. While it is an important resource, and may be influential in shaping social psychological research practice in years to come, one hopes that researchers will look a little further for innovation in methodology.