

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE, TAKE TWO

Terre Blanche, M, Durrheim, K and Painter, D (eds) (2006) **Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences**, 2nd edition. Cape Town: UCT Press.
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Research in practice (RIP) has been substantively updated and reworked for its 2nd edition (**RIP2**). It was previously reviewed in **PINS** (Parker, 2001), and as a mark of its importance to interdisciplinary worlds of social science, psychology and research methodology in South Africa (and beyond), it is reviewed again. A second review will inevitably refract inter-textual impressions of new and original versions. The text remains a courageous, sprawling trawl through the complex research-dialogues produced by “proliferation of radically divergent philosophies and techniques” (pviii). Pedagogically, it aims to scaffold soundly argued research processes for students in terms of major paradigms, designs and techniques. To achieve this aim, the editors have reconfigured somewhat haphazard chapters in the original version into more coherent (to my mind) thematic sections. Thus, Section 1 provides a broad overview of decision-making in the research process. Sections 2 and 3 examine the lore of quantitative and qualitative research practice respectively. Section 4 deals with the real-problems in real-contexts of applied research.

The reviewer of the original text, Ian Parker, read **RIP** as a radical critique of the discipline of psychology – rather than yet another text about methodology per se – that put meaning, experience and action into a broader hurly-burly of social science knowledge, and interrogated our examination of them. Parker’s (2001) argument singled out two “subversions” performed by the original text, namely deliberate South Africanization of research issues and examples that defied hegemonic Euro-American values; and dissolution of habituated tensions between methodological traditions as chapters on quantitative measurement and social constructionist methods interleaved to meet the real (developing) world. While the four new sections in **RIP2** are addressed below, I begin with broader critical readings triggered by Parker’s subversions.

The localization of material is a strong and sustained presence in **RIP2** through its clearing of space for South African researchers and research studies, real-life examples, illustrative

boxes, and whole, integrative chapters on solving problems. This committed engagement with contextualized, psychologized knowledges is admirable, critically intended or not. It is a worthy, interesting and “prescribable” text on this relevance criterion alone.

However, ironically, where **RIP2** works less well – pedagogically, critically, post-colonially – is in making its Euro-American roots explicit. Thus, the meta/theoretical positioning of methodologies (or techniques), beyond South African applications as examples, are somewhat clumsily and patchily achieved. How-to descriptions are authoritatively generic, and there is a tendency towards blurring distinctions between epistemological and methodological particularities. This authorial/editorial style may of course be intentional for pragmatic reasons due to the sheer breadth of a text already pushing 600 pages; or to avoid demonized “methodolatry” as slavish recipe-following (p339); or to position the text as a (prescribable) one-stop-shop rather than a portal through which primary sources of arguments/tools may be accessed. However, in qualitative research practice (in particular), contemporary contexts of justification/discovery require naming a particular *author’s* paradigmatic, theoretical and technical position, rather than broad interpretive or constructionist principles. The text provides too few, or too broad, inter-textual signposts within chapters and as “key readings” at the end of chapters. Some examples from Section 3 on qualitative approaches follow, but these issues persisted beyond this section.

Whose qualitative sampling strategies are listed (p290)? Do they apply to all qualitative paradigms? *Which* constructionist researchers object to the analysis of interview material (p297)? Several positions are glossed here, which powerfully impacts on what kinds of discourse are gathered and analyzed within rival discursive schools. *Whose* model/s of “thematic pattern finding” or “thematic temporal linking” is/are being explicated (pp362-3)? Would the former be synonymous with a hermeneutic analysis, and the latter a narrative analysis, or are these forms of selective/axial coding of Grounded Theory? Unless analytical guidelines are paradigmatically and theoretically situated, and deploy recognizable jargon as searchable keywords, they are easily misread and misquoted as methods that are objective (theory-free and position-neutral) and context-less (generally applicable to any/all data). In instances where authors are cited in **RIP2**, their positions are glossed. For example, “Seidman (1991) says that, as an interviewer, one should [do the following twelve good things] ...” (p299). Here Seidman’s explicitly “phenomenological” interviewing technology appears as benign advice for “natural” conversations. Similarly, “Parker (1992)” is liberally used to illustrate how-to-do a generic kind of “discourse analysis” (pp328-337), without carefully positioning his eclectic critical approach – notwithstanding my own “Parkerian” analysis of discourses of child sexual abuse later on (Box 14.8, pp341-4).

Rather than dissolving paradigmatic tensions between quantitative and qualitative discourses, **RIP2** unavoidably reinvents them through separating them into Sections 2 and 3. The editors are reflexive about this effect in their preface (pviii). However, while Section 1 could have provided some confluence between these quantitative-qualitative binaries through attention to “the research process”, it appeared somewhat stymied by its own how-to pragmatism and theory-lightness. This theory-lightness launches itself in Chapter 1 (Histories of the present: Social science in context) through theoretically bland accounts of three paradigms. The hypothetico-deductive model, which inexplicably becomes

“positivism” later on in the chapter/text, is posited as describing a stable external reality in a detached manner through experimentation and quantification (p6); and is cast against others, Interpretivism and Constructionism, as more contemporary paradigm shifts. There are several related implications to this preferred version of paradigms.

The only rapprochement or engagement between quantitative and qualitative others appears as “triangulation”; and furthermore, triangulation appears as an inherent requirement for credibility of *qualitative* knowledge claims (p91, p287 & p380). Different triangulation tactics are made visible (different paradigms, theories, data sources, etc.), but underlying positivist and hermeneutic assumptions about how truthful knowledge emerges from triangulation remain hazy – that is, *convergence* and *harmonious whole-meanings* indicate truth. How then would researchers manage “divergence”? Which rival account would be credible? Are all paradigms/theories equally “triangulatable” with one another? Would there be dominant and nested paradigms/theories? How could one fit this complex argumentation into a 5-page proposal or a 50-page thesis? I noted that mono-method bias is not mentioned as a threat to internal or external validity in evaluating quantitative designs (Chapter 8), quantitative measurement (Chapter 7) or assessment research (Chapter 22).

Having fabricated paradigmatic tensions between quantitative and qualitative approaches, further tension is rightfully opened up between interpretive and constructionist qualitative approaches. However, the problem with this in a too-busy book is that the distinctions between qualitative approaches sometimes slip. Authors revert to some kind of New-Paradigm, Binary-Opposite-of-Quantification, Veiled-Hermeneutic version of qualitative research as contextual, inductive, iterative, subjective, deeply valid, caring towards participants, etc. (e.g. Chapter 3, Research design, and Chapter 13, Collecting data in qualitative research). As questions that shape research design, Chapter 3 presents a smorgasbord of choices, e.g. exploratory or explanatory aims, basic or applied focus, individual or group unit of analysis, etc. While this argument considers purpose, paradigm, context and techniques in decision-making, it tends to downplay the importance of theory-laden, design-archetypes, which to a greater or lesser extent, *speak for us* in producing paradigmatically concordant designs. Qualitative design-archetypes include strategies such as “ethnography”, “phenomenology”, “narrative biography”, “Grounded Theory”, “conversation analysis”, etc. These did not appear in any systematic way in Section 1, although one or two are mentioned in Section 4’s applied research.

Another definitional complication arrives in Chapter 12 (Why qualitative research?) with the assertion of a “Common-sense perspective” (p272-3). Here a so-called “inductive”, “descriptive”, “exploratory” and “pilot” approach to qualitative research pops up – clearly *not* interpretive or constructionist qualitative varieties. This qualitative perspective, although it is said to have gained acceptance in most social science and applied health research fields, is barely given two pages of coverage in **RIP2**. It is further claimed that this perspective “is essentially a positivist perspective ... judged on the same standards of reliability and validity as quantitative research” (p273). It is unclear how a reader might reconcile the positivist definition of quantification, experiments and hypothetico-deduction (in Chapter 1) with this new “common-sense” induction. As only a single research example is anecdotally described, it is also uncertain what specific qualitative research praxes might fall into this betwixt-category. Does “inductive thematic analysis” fit? If so, how does this induction differ

from the immersion-open-coding-thematizing tactics of Grounded Theory offered as “interpretive analysis” later on (Chapter 14, First steps in qualitative data analysis, pp321)? What about naïve phenomenology, where line-by-line, transcript-by-transcript, condensation of meanings (by several analysts) constitutes a more or less valid/reliable, inductive description of experience?

An approach curiously not mentioned in **RIP2** is a so-called “interpretive thematic analysis” – where a semi-structured interview schedule is used to collect thematized data, and these (deductive) “themes” are mapped among groups of interviewees to describe patterns of similarities and differences. Might this also be dumped into the “common-sense perspective”? Miles and Huberman appeared as a key reading at the end of the Chapter 14 (p344) – did this refer to interpretive thematic analysis? The lack of address, nor clear signposting, of appropriate paradigmatic/theoretical models or stepwise techniques within this variety of qualitative research is an oversight, given that it increasingly represents the methodology of choice for many postgraduate students who are spooked by the complexities of “theory” and “interpretation” in qualitative research - particularly English as second or third language speakers. It also demonstrates a bias in **RIP2** towards interpretive and constructionist paradigms, which might have been resolved through addition of an applied chapter on “common-sense” thematic analysis in Section 4. There would also be wisdom in exploring alternative, theory-rich, qualitative versions of positivism, such as varieties of realism, contextualism or Kvale’s (1996) metaphor of “mining”.

Some of the unevenness of terminologies and sidelining of theory in **RIP2** might be a function of an edited text that draws together differently authored and reworked chapters into differently focused sections; and as such is not smoothed into seamless coherence (cf. Parker, 2001). Holding my critical readings in mind, I turn now to briefer, concluding comments on specific sections/chapters. Section 1 tracks the research process as decisions/activities that precede and follow data collection and analysis. As such, its undoubted strength and usefulness lies in its conceptual and pragmatic tools to get research going. Chapter 5 (Putting design into practice: Writing and evaluating research proposals) is exemplary in this regard. The substantively reconfigured version in **RIP2** includes two actual research proposals by student-researchers (Boxes 5.5 & 5.6, pp 95-109), presented with expository comments by the authors on each paragraph’s tasks, strengths and weaknesses; and margin notes of students’ talking-back about their experiences of proposal-writing, with many hints and tips.

Section 2 examines research in positivist mode. I wondered if a 135-page section was rather too substantive for a paradigm said to be “previously dominant in the 20th century”, and that “it is now widely accepted that there is more to social science than this” (p5). I did not find post-positivist critique to be readily visible in this section (e.g. critical realism, etc.), but I possibly became inattentive due to the sameness of this map of the territories of quantification to countless other maps. If the considerable conceptual overlaps between chapters are editorially intended (e.g. Chapter 7, Sampling and measuring, Chapter 8, Evaluating research design, and Chapter 3 Research design), this possibly implies that student-readers are expected to dip into different chapters at different times during research process/practice. **RIP2** is published with a “MoonStats” CD as downloadable

statistical software for personal computers, which provides tools for data exploration and computation of standard descriptive, bivariate and inferential statistics.

As a qualitative methodology teacher, I have grappled often with my resistance towards **RIP**'s qualitative research chapters. In **RIP2**, chapters in Section 3 have been rewritten, reframed and reordered into a semblance of cohesiveness and coherence. While I acknowledge this work and improvements wrought with collegial respect, I remain unconvinced of the wisdom of lumping interpretive and constructionist approaches together, particularly in light of inconsistent scaffolding of referrals out to deeper theoretical or technical argumentation. The constant flick-flacking between paradigms makes it difficult for authors to achieve or sustain theoretical crispness of complex positions, technical acuity or reflexivity. Both complex paradigms regress to bland, stereotyped aggregates of themselves, which hardly shifted understanding or informed research practice.

For example, comprehensible or practicable guidelines for constructionist discourse-gatherers are impossible to locate in Chapter 13 (Collecting data in qualitative research), which is implicitly and insidiously interpretivist in orientation. The point is not made that "appropriate data" is largely manufactured to be analyzed from a particular perspective, rather than analysis (and truthful knowledge) simply "emerging" from the context or unstructured data. This is particularly true for focus group discussions, visual images, participant observations and vast archives of documents (pp 304-316), which are notoriously difficult to analyze without explicit stepwise plans from the outset, conceptual frameworks, digital/software technologies and previous studies. The Grounded Theory analysis offered as "interpretive analysis" in Chapter 14 seems to peter out into producing "a written account of the phenomenon you studied ... using thematic categories from your analysis as sub-headings" (p326). Later on, working through the parts (themes) and whole-meanings of "the hermeneutic circle", the goal of interpretation becomes integration of lived experience (context) and distanced perspectives (theory) (p363). These abstract guidelines need a sustained, worked through research example within the chapter, rather than odd flickering of research studies here and there. The point is not made in the generic-qualitative tone of Chapter 15 (Lived experience and interpretation: The balancing act in qualitative research) that social constructionist approaches *resist* such balancing-act harmonies.

On the whole, the social constructionist paradigm is better served in **RIP2** than interpretivism through substantive theoretical sections in textboxes and quirky practical analyses that digest complex ideas, concepts and issues. However, the section on social constructionist analysis (Chapter 14, p328), here apparently synonymous with "discourse analysis", remains (to my mind) as problematic as it was in the original version. This is because it opts for a no-name-brand of discourse analysis that blurs distinctions between styles, aims and specific statuses of discourse they have honed conceptual tools to unravel – a bugbear of mine (see Wilbraham, 2004). If authors/editors did this to simplify discourse analysis for beginner-researchers, they have done them a disservice, for such unpositioned discursive work has little/no credibility with any audience.

The problem with the eclectic-tools-as-tricks approach to discourse analysis espoused in Chapter 14 is that it slides inexorably towards "thematic analysis"; a problem exacerbated

by blurring with contiguous hermeneutics. Furthermore, there is confusing contradiction of discourse theory terminology - *discourse*, *a discourse* and *discourses* - in the chapter's main narrative and the illustrative textboxes. For example, without the explicit and sustained Foucauldian definition of discourses as particular sets of institutionalized practices and technical jargon of expertise in documents/texts (mostly), discourses became synonyms for "themes". This misrepresentation is aided by enjoining readers to "identify recurrent terms, phrases and metaphors present in a text (Potter & Wetherell, 1987)" (p331). In the vigorous discourse-wars since 1987, both Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell have dumped this analysis of interpretive repertoires – seen as outmoded thematic clumping within a large interview-data corpus – and have shifted, in stylistically different ways, towards conversation analytical tactics within micro-contexts of interactive discourse. These debates and schisms are glossed.

Finally, Section 4 engages with applied research in various guises, contexts and functions. The quality of chapters in this section is patchy, with some doing no more than describing particular fields or techniques (e.g. Chapter 17, Jobs and careers in social science, and Chapter 22, Assessment research). I noted the editorial axing in **RIP2** of a chapter on survey methods in market and media research. The original chapter was brutally technical and took a conventional, "realist" position on media-work, and so is not sorely missed in **RIP2**. Its survey methodology is picked up in the updated chapters of Section 2. However, given psychology's increasing entanglements in media campaigns/studies, there is a gap in **RIP2** for an edgy, constructionist chapter on media research. Some chapters in Section 4 take on somewhat dreary and established fields of research, and surprisingly, spin methodological innovations and find critical conceptual ledges that produce new ways of seeing (e.g. Chapter 11, Programme evaluation, and Chapter 14, Research methods in clinical research). These chapters are also generous in their scaffolding of referrals to expository theoretical and technical literature.

The three concluding chapters of **RIP2** ensure that the text closes with a bang rather than a whimper (Chapter 23, Standpoint methodologies: Marxist, feminist and black scholarship, Chapter 24, Postmodernism: A critical practice, and Chapter 25, Postcolonial African methods and interpretation). These chapters are theory-dense, well written, critically assured, and by turns serious and playful. Here is the radical critique of psychology that Parker (2001) figured. Chapter 25 is a welcome new addition to **RIP2**, and attends to how assumptions about "culture" and "African-ness" are appropriated into the (western) research questions we ask and the psychological knowledges about "others" we document.

May this huge text find the responses its energy and commitment deserve: to be prescribed and read; to be criticized and argued about; and to be used to get-a-move-on with social scientific research that worries real issues.

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