

REVIEW ESSAY

A NEW GENERATION OF METHODOLOGY TEXTBOOKS?

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Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, London: Sage 1996, £37.50, paperback £11.95, 192 pp.

Alan Bryman and Duncan Cramer, *Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS for Windows: A Guide for Social Scientists*, London: Routledge, 1997, £50, paperback £15.99, 313 pp.

Roger Sapsford and Victor Jupp (eds.) *Data Collection and Analysis*, London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1996, £42.50, paperback £14.95, 384 pp.

Why do people write methodology texts? Is it perhaps to incorporate new approaches to social science – postmodernism, for example? Is it to demystify myths and misapprehensions about methodological principles and practice? Is it to incorporate new research studies to provide lively contemporary examples? If these texts are anything to go by the answer is rather more cynical. Re-presenting old material under new covers provides publishers with an edge in the market. To suggest that there is nothing new at all in the books reviewed would be unfair, but none of them fall into the ‘radically new approach’ category or, to be honest, even into the ‘that’s quite an interesting way of approaching things’ category. Many tired old examples and ways of explaining things are rehased and there is an overwhelming feeling that we have progressed little, methodologically, since the 1970s. The only clear differences between these books and those of nearly thirty years ago are an attempt to limit jargon and take a less ideological view about the efficacy and importance of methodological styles. Unfortunately, in most cases this is coupled with a less rigorous analysis of methodology and an infuriating tendency to slide into common-sense modes of thinking that *de facto* re-present phenomenism as a taken-for-granted orienting framework.

Qualitative Researching claims to bridge the gap between ‘cook-book’ and ‘abstract methodological’ approaches to qualitative research and provide students and first-time researchers with a ‘clear and accessible introduction to the practice of qualitative social research’. The reality is that the book is predominantly an account of practice, with a rather muddled approach to ‘abstract methodological issues’.

The structure of the book follows the stages of research practice with chapters on planning, interviewing, observation, sampling, organising data and providing convincing explanations. So, for example, in the chapter on observation we have the standard introduction about ‘researchers immersing themselves in the research setting’. Mason then brushes aside debates about the nature, depth and implications of different types of researcher involvement in the research setting and offers some general practical principles for any kind of observational method.

Mason uses the device of asking ‘difficult questions’ about qualitative research practice in order to explore issues. These questions are of two types: those relating to

epistemological and ontological issues and those relating to decisions about practice. So, when discussing observation, for example, the planning stage is framed round the question, 'Do I intend to be a participant, an observer or a participant observer?' The answer boils down to not making a 'once-and-for-all' decision and being responsive to the changing context. This is sound advice and worth stating. It is a moot point, though, whether a book that provides such abstract advice is particularly useful if it is disconnected from the likely problems that a researcher will meet in fieldwork situations. Conversely, if one is providing that advice, in the abstract, then it would be better linked to a much more extensive analysis of the qualitative research setting, the nature of the involvement of researchers, ethical issues, and the type of knowledge being generated, than that provided by Mason.

What is disappointing about the book is that the opportunity to explore the problematic issues of qualitative research practice is lost in the attempt to 'bridge the gap'. Rather than provide another re-write of the distinguished qualitative methodology texts that combine practice and principles that date back to the readers edited by McCall and Simmons (1969), Denzin (1970) and Deutscher (1973), which were re-processed by Burgess (1982) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), an opportunity exists to produce a 'cook-book' with advice as to how to deal with inevitable problems. However, the potential gets waylaid by both the personalised style and the perceived need to explore ontological and epistemological issues.

The book is written in an extremely irritating, personalised manner. There is far too much: 'I believe', 'in my view', 'I have tried . . .', 'I wish to . . .'. Every page is littered with these unnecessary interjections. For example: 'The style of the researcher, in my view, is to be able to articulate what is the essence of the enquiry. I think it is a struggle because, in order to get to this essence, researchers have to ask themselves some difficult questions'. Why not: 'The struggle for any researcher is to articulate the essence of the enquiry, which requires asking themselves some difficult questions'? At that rate of attrition, the book would only be 90 pages long!

The device of asking 'difficult questions' potentially helps to link issues of practice with epistemological and ontological decisions. However, the book is underpinned by a positivistic approach to qualitative research, in which practitioners are encouraged to test hypotheses, and provide generalisable explanations. The tentative discussions of epistemological and ontological issues are effectively circumvented by a pragmatic approach that, while calling for a reflective confrontation of 'difficult questions', effectively predetermines the methodological style.

For example, Mason deplores the notion of a 'qualitative-quantitative' divide, especially if it embodies a methodological myopia – an altogether laudable view. However, this does not, as one might have hoped, lead to the exploration of the mystification of the dichotomisation of research traditions. Mason does not, for example, explore in any detail the relationship, or lack of it, between qualitative and quantitative traditions and positivism or phenomenology, let alone how they relate to interactionist, functionalist, feminist, postmodernist or any other approaches to social research. More damning still, is the lack of recognition of the 'critical' tradition of social research. Mason fails to address, for example, the way that critical ethnography has been used to take qualitative research beyond the realm of minutely mapping social settings to locating detailed qualitative evidence in a broader critical framework, as, for example in the studies by Willis (1977), Westwood (1984), Worrall (1990), Matlanyane Sexwale (1994) and many others.

In trying to bridge the gap the book falls into the chasm. If one can accept the irritating style, then there are some useful pointers as to how to approach qualitative research. However, the overriding phenomenalist framework means that it has limited applicability. The underlying 'common-sense' approach, though, makes its one-

dimensionalism appealing to new researchers. To suggest that this is a dangerous influence might be going too far, but new researchers should not be lulled into thinking that qualitative research can be approached by answering some 'difficult questions' within the phenomenalist framework.

Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS for Windows: A Guide for Social Scientists, by Alan Bryman and Duncan Cramer, is an update of an earlier text entitled *Quantitative Data Analysis for Social Scientists* (Bryman and Cramer 1990) that linked the teaching of statistical procedures to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the foremost statistical analysis package. The new text exhibits very little that is new. Not only does it draw on the earlier text, it draws on a long line of previous explanations of statistical principles and procedures. There is little that is innovative by way of exploration and critique, indeed novelty is provided by the inclusion of references to SPSS for Windows.

On the operational side, in Chapter 2, for example, the authors introduce the notion of a data file, and the need to identify which variables relate to which columns of the data file, and how to assign SPSS names to them. This misses out a crucial stage for most beginning researchers, how to identify the variables in their questionnaire and how to code them and thus create a data file from the responses. The Bryman and Cramer text provides a number of illustrations showing displays, menus and dialog boxes but the explanation of what is to be done at each step is, ironically, not as easy to follow in prose style as it is in most computer manuals where the sequence of actions is specified on a line-by-line basis. The problem with the approach in *Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS for Windows* is that if one is making use of it as a guide and something in the text does not work, it is difficult to pick up the threads again.

The book, in one sense, is the negative of the SPSS manual. The manual clearly concentrates on the operation of SPSS but in passing provides a very compact explanation of statistical procedures. Bryman and Cramer provide more detailed explorations of statistical procedures with very compact accounts of the operation of SPSS. The manual is easier to follow.

Quantitative Data Analysis with SPSS for Windows claims to be a non-technical guide ignoring traditional formulaic methods. The claim is that the book assumes no prior familiarity, on the part of the reader, with either statistical analysis or computing. However, someone entirely unfamiliar with Windows would need to spend some time acclimatising themselves to the system before they could reasonably make use of the book to undertake statistical analysis using SPSS. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that someone with absolutely no experience of statistical analysis could use the book without assistance.

The first quarter of the book explores the role of data analysis in the research process and introduces SPSS for Windows. The remainder of the book treads familiar territory from simple descriptive data through sampling and significance tests, bivariate and multivariate analysis to factor analysis.

Unlike Mason, Bryman and Cramer are fairly indifferent to epistemological and ontological issues. The approach in the opening chapter is to establish rapidly why social scientists should want to use statistical analysis, and then, via an aside about the need for healthy scepticism, to set up the standard cyclical model of hypothesis setting, operationalisation of concepts, sampling, data collection, analysis, testing of hypotheses and implication for theory. There is little discussion of appropriate epistemological frameworks, and a taken-for-granted assumption that the positivistic explanatory model is adequate. Indeed, in the spirit of an introductory text, the authors avoid becoming embroiled in any serious discussion of causality by asserting a probabilistic view and reiterating the long-established, but no less spurious, statistical 'definition' of causality, namely, non-spurious correlation and temporal order. A lack

of prominent warning about inferring causal links on the basis of statistical correlation, even given the caveats about temporal sequence and spurious relationships, is a worrying omission.

One might have hoped that the later chapter 'Concepts and Their Measurement' would have rectified the omission, but it turns out that the key role of the chapter is threefold. First, to differentiate between nominal, ordinal and interval scale data. Second, drawing heavily on the work of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1972) work, to explore how to define a 'broad concept' in terms of a number of dimensions and a range of indicators within each dimension. Third, to reiterate the same old uncritical analysis of the notions of validity and reliability.

Most of the rest of the book is driven by the basic statistical procedures available using SPSS. Standard explanations of the procedures, that have appeared in hundreds of statistical text books, are interspersed with references to how to undertake the analysis using SPSS for Windows. Occasional illustrations of a dialog box are, no doubt, included to give users confidence that they are on the right track.

In essence, the references to Windows apart, the material in this book can be found in just about any other statistical text book – or indeed, self-grown lecture handouts. The 'non-technical' approach has been used before (Kapadia and Anderson 1987; Glenberg 1988; Harvey and MacDonald 1993) and the idea of combining the exploration of statistical procedures with computer programs predates the authors' previous work (see, for example, Cohen and Holliday 1982).

Data Collection and Analysis, edited by Roger Sapsford and Victor Jupp, claims to explain a comprehensive range of social research techniques. Like the other texts being reviewed, the editors claim to do this in simple non-technical terms. The book attempts to provide a broad spread across a range of methodological practices. Although the breadth is commendable, the balance is overwhelmingly towards quantitative social research, with two-thirds of the technique chapters devoted to quantitative procedures. This is curious at a time when non-quantitative research is being taken increasingly seriously, without having to be constantly legitimated, even within the policy sphere.

There are twelve contributors in all to this volume, which is in three main sections: design issues (including chapters on validating evidence and survey sampling), data collection (observational research, asking questions, statistical sources and databases, using documents) and data analysis (preparing numerical data, extracting and presenting statistics, statistical techniques, multivariate analysis, analysis of unstructured data and documents and critical research). The conclusion considers the ethics and politics of research but there is no attempt to integrate these issues into the rest of the text.

The editors authored the opening chapter, which sets the tone of the text by focusing on 'validity', by which they mean that the evidence presented can bear the weight of the interpretation placed upon it. They argue that, in essence, the structure of a piece of research determines the conclusions that can be drawn from it. This immediately establishes an epistemological position that lies unstated but implicit through most of the rest of the book – that somehow the data speaks to confirm or disconfirm the theoretical propositions that guided its collection. This is not an unacceptable approach, much research is pursued along these lines, and it is certainly more acceptable than research that merely twists the data to a particular political end. However, it is a limited approach as it focuses the research inward on the data rather than seeing the data as merely evidence in developing a broader contextualised and, ultimately, critical case.

Similar to the other texts, *Data Collection and Analysis* presupposes the qualitative–quantitative dichotomy and although there is a chapter that engages with critical social research, there is no attempt to raise questions about the dichotomisation of research

methodology, which is a curious omission in the latter half of the 1990s. Jupp's exploration of critical social research is embedded in a chapter on document analysis (although he does note, parenthetically, that critical research is not exclusive to the use of documents).

Taking this chapter as an example, a brief outline suggests that social scientists draw on a wide range of documentary sources and that they are concerned not just with the genesis and interpretation of 'qualitative' documentary material but also in the ways that 'quantitative' data are assembled and reported. In exploring critical social research, Jupp points out that the approach in the chapter is somewhat different from other chapters because 'the distinction between theorising and empirical research is not one that is readily accepted by those who engage in critical analysis'. This begs the question, why, even if survey research leads to the collection of data 'without explicit reference to theory;' such an approach should be implicitly endorsed. Having said that, the chapter goes on to address some complex issues in the spirit of the book – in (reasonably) simple non-technical terms. It is a shame that a major tradition of social research is buried in a section on document analysis, which many readers are likely to see as an aside.

The claim to be 'non-technical' is stretched to the limit in the discussion of multivariate analysis. Judith Calder and Roger Sapsford attempt to describe the process as simply as possible but the central principles tend to become engulfed by the unnecessarily complex, if realistic, examples. In essence, the chapter would not be easily understood by someone with no previous experience of multivariate analysis. It may clarify procedures and practices, but by no means eases the reader through the process in a step-by-step approach.

However, this is indicative of the whole book. Despite being an 'introduction' it is an introduction at a level beyond the novice. There are a range of suggested activities that might help guide learning. However, although useful, they tend to be comprehension tests, the completion of tasks, or interpolations from example data. There is little sense of the reader being asked to work on self-generated research activities. Furthermore, the distribution of suggested learning activities throughout the text is also uneven, leading to a definite feeling that, in some chapters, these are add-ons rather than integral to a student-centred learning approach.

Reading these methodology books certainly endorses the view that all thoughts have already been thought. The books are highly derivative of much earlier work and most disappointing of all, fail adequately to confront the myth of a qualitative–quantitative dichotomy in social research. Only *Data Collection and Analysis* acknowledges a critical approach, although discussion of it is hived off into a single chapter.

While providing little that is new, Bryman and Cramer would be an aid to researchers starting to use SPSS for Windows to analyse a questionnaire. Similarly, Mason offers some advice on what to ask oneself when undertaking qualitative research. The edited collection by Sapsford and Jupp covers the widest range and is pitched just above 'entry-level', which makes it more difficult to use as a student-centred text. Equally, the level of engagement with the material provides little by way of novelty or insight for the experienced practising researchers. Its most likely use would be as a supportive aid to methodology teachers.

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