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Choices, Responsibility , and Trade - Offs: A Review of Designing Research in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

The challenge of doing research in the social sciences and other disciplines is anchored in the dilemma of finding the right research design to pursue an inquiry path leading to trustworthy evidences . Designing Research in the Social Sciences (Maggetti, Gilardi, & Radaelli , 2013) is an elucidative narrative, adding a strong voice in helping novice and seasoned researchers to redirect their thoughts and research actions into meaningful efforts to find balance (trade - offs) in research implementation. This new tome is not the usual 'cook book' in the research design arena, rather it focuses your mind into appreciating the craft of research; from understanding the social sciences, concepts, causal analysis and related statistical designs to the features that make the world of social research; it's a new dawn.

Keywords

Research Design, Conceptual Analysis, Causal Inference, Choices, Trade - Offs

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Choices, Responsibility, and Trade-Offs: A Review of *Designing Research in the Social Sciences*

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*The challenge of doing research in the social sciences and other disciplines is anchored in the dilemma of finding the right research design to pursue an inquiry path leading to trustworthy evidences. *Designing Research in the Social Sciences* (Maggetti, Gilardi, & Radaelli, 2013) is an elucidative narrative, adding a strong voice in helping novice and seasoned researchers to redirect their thoughts and research actions into meaningful efforts to find balance (trade-offs) in research implementation. This new tome is not the usual 'cook book' in the research design arena, rather it focuses your mind into appreciating the craft of research; from understanding the social sciences, concepts, causal analysis and related statistical designs to the features that make the world of social research; it's a new dawn! Keywords: Research Design, Conceptual Analysis, Causal Inference, Choices, Trade-Offs*

Introduction

My experience of wading through the world of social science research commenced from the natural science stand point; working as a nutritionist in the health intervention platform led me to picking up interest in the social science research discipline; I majored in medical anthropology from the cultural and sociology perspective, hence I feel quite familiar with the message that this new book is placing before me and the rest of the readers interested or yearning for new knowledge in the ever changing realm of social science research practice. I attended university research methods classes to enable me learn the craft of research practice, but many a times I remain puzzled by the call of choosing the right approach to implementing a research inquiry.

As I write this review, I find myself in a position of teaching in a research method lectures and supporting upcoming researchers; I faced the same questions and the dilemma of which method is right or which design is suitable for this and that study question; is it qualitative or quantitative design? Once more as I write this, I am still learning to fine tune my research craft and make the best of what is available in the field to generate the best evidence there is for my students and fellow researchers in the art of doing research.

About the Book

When I saw this book's call for review in *The Qualitative Report*, I was excited to see the latest reference material in designing research protocol for my personal work as well as for my students; my expectation was that I would expand my knowledge with this newly minted work. My question to this new arrival was: what pertinent inspiration can come from this title? Is it the case of a paradigm shift and or innovation in using qualitative and quantitative research traditions? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Thus the Sage publication new addition: *Designing Research in the Social Sciences* (Maggetti, Gilardi, & Radaelli, 2013) is a unique work from three experienced proponents of "discipline" research craft and their area of expertise in the political sciences. The structure of the book from the first to the seventh chapters excluding the concluding one is written to

make understanding the work easier; the body of the work takes the reader through the gist of each chapter with pointed references to guide and expand one's knowledge sphere, while at the end gives also an important checklist to guide the reader on what he or she has just gone through; an additional set of questions to help the reader reflect on the chapter and thankfully a list of suggested further readings to help deepens one's understanding; it is a great effort to reach the reader with the key messages in the book. An interesting aspect of the book is seen in the rich real-life examples offered by authors albeit from their political science works; this will keep you riveted in the book to continue absorbing the storyline.

I guess readers of research methods from the health sciences discipline might be a tad disappointed in not getting examples from their world, but I say do not worry, I feel that the secret of appreciating the book lies in focusing on the gist of the book on research design and the elaborate explanation offered to the "reader over their shoulder" to paraphrase their citation on those for whom the book is written. Also it may appear that for a novice researcher and graduate students, the language of the book feels difficult, but my advice is that this work can be used as a companion to complement basic courses and texts in the research craft of the social sciences, and should help anyone to go far; for the seasoned shop floor practitioners aka researchers, the book should be a welcome addition in rethinking their hallowed ground.

The premise of the book is based on the many choices, responsibility and trade-offs required in managing the crowded terrain of social science research shop-floor; with many schools of thoughts, persuasions, and perspectives on research designs, there is bound to be a stiff struggle to get the best purchase in having one's vantage position's voice heard as in "let a hundred flowers blossom" from the Mao Zedong's citation. The point is well made that amidst these pluralism, there should be some form of communication without degeneration to "sectarian thinking" in the research world especially within the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

While reading through this book, I came to the realisation that chapters 1, 2, and 3 are the core of the book for which a first time reader must endeavour to read carefully to draw rich learning from; chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 are clearly as important since they provide the much needed explanations to the gist of the book. Professor Radaelli sets the pace by offering you the purpose and basis of the book; by pointing forthwith the many persuasions in the research craft, he goes ahead to suggest the trade-offs required to get along on the research shop-floor; reference is made for example on how students and faculty lament on the divide in the qualitative and quantitative research; ever heard of the *soft* and *hard* sciences, and how the proponents view each other with suspicions? Ironically, he asserts that "some of the great works in the field published in major journals are produced by scholars who write across the qualitative-quantitative divide" (p.6).

To the un-initiated, Radaelli suggests a minimalist and humble definition of research designs as being a set of decisions taken to minimise bias; this in a way explains why choices of methods in research depend on the understanding of design and previous thinking on the cases of interest; however two important questions that relate to research design are the "*so what*" and the "*who cares*" questions; these point to again the trade-offs required in making choices of design and determining research outputs and outcome as well as its use. In this regard also, understanding of where the social scientists situate themselves is important if one is to appreciate what happens in the shop-floor practice.

As I mentioned earlier about the structure of the book, how do the explanatory chapters relate to the initial first three core chapters? Indeed the order of work in the book is such that, the next piece adds and builds on the previous ones; the heart of the book is in the analysis of the causal relations in the social sciences presented in chapter 3, where understanding of causal relationships among social phenomena is the main agenda, while the mechanics is in finding rooms for applying what is suitable for answering questions in our

research projects or undertakings; this forthwith is linked to the next chapter 4 which Dr. Maggetti offers a rich overview of approaches for constructing research designs for causal analysis. Thereafter the succeeding sections are in-depth focus on the features of social sciences research world; ones need to appreciate “temporality,” “heterogeneity,” and “interdependence” in order to operate surefootedly in the social science research arena; without these three sections, one would not understand how to engage in the shop-floor research practice and obtain the right trade-offs in effecting a research activity, hence in temporality, Professor Radaelli takes the reader to learn more why it is a foundational concept for causal analysis, as causal relations unfold over time; in heterogeneity, one will get to appreciate the use of variables in research, which originates from the fact that social phenomena are deeply heterogeneous at many levels of scale and finally on interdependence, Professor Gilardi shows us why it is a defining feature of the social world with a direct bearing on research methods in the social world and challenges in empirical analysis under the “Galton’s problem” as well as citing Przeworski and Teune (1970) with the question: “How many independent events can we observe?” You are certainly invited to check this work.

At £ 26.99 for the Paperback and £ 75.00 Hardcover, this 200 page book is indeed a pocket friendly one, yet a very rich informative learning material that prompts the reader to think a little more and become better along the way. It is an appropriate work for upcoming researchers and graduate students as well as instructors in both the qualitative and quantitative research designs traditions at universities and training institutions. I also see that practitioners in the development agencies’ world, and funding organisations keen on promoting rigorous approach to development interventions would also benefit well in using this book for their methods guidance in project implementation.

Then while reading this work, I see the concerted effort of the authors in pulling all the stops to elaborate on research designs and the trade-offs therein for managing research practice; citing (Booth et al., 2008), they note that “the craft of research is about tying claims, arguments and evidence” (p.5). Hence “instead of segregating researchers, we should be open to the possibility of selectively and intelligently importing major conceptual findings from different traditions” (p.8). An important assertion on trade-offs is that: “when there is a trade-off, strictly speaking, it is not between a group of choices that are right and another group that are wrong” (p.9), it is rather looking at the merits and demerits and working on how to use what can give us the best evidence.

Finally, I was wondering how someone new in the research field world can benefit from a book like this? My suggestion is that, while the intention of this work was to elucidate on the pertinent research issues and give useful directions for “flexibility” without losing laden values and principles, a fair dose of basic research concepts and design information in future editions might be an added advantage for especially novices; in this way the work becomes a one stop point for a comprehensive learning and thoughts provocation for a richer research practice and a repository for useful evidence in the social sciences.

Reference

Maggetti, M., Gilardi, F., & Radaelli, C. M. (2013). *Designing research in the social sciences*. London, UK. Sage Publications.

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