Is it Real? Problems and Prospects of Research in "the Real World"

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Review Essay:

Colin Robson (2002). Real World Research. A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers (Second Edition). Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 624 pages, ISBN 0-631-21305-8, £17.99 $39.95

Abstract: This handbook will be very useful as an overview of various strategies, methods and research designs in social research, combining quantitative and qualitative research in a critical realist paradigm. The reader is introduced to debates concerning various approaches to research, from the positivist to the relativist, whilst putting forth an argument for a reconstructed scientific approach that the author calls "real world research." Readers are then introduced to research design, methods of gathering data and then, finally, the analysis of data and reporting on one's enquiry. While this will most likely be a useful introductory text for novice or lay researchers, especially those engaged in research with a policy orientation, more specialized readers in some disciplines might not be as well served.

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1. Introduction: Goals, Perspective, Problems

This is indeed a hefty volume with which to contend both intellectually (given its wide coverage) and even physically (due to its husky girth). In comparison with most other handbooks, it is probably standard in length, making it a challenge to thoroughly use any one of these texts, let alone a combination of them, in an introductory course. That aside, this is an eminently teachable book. It is written for a very wide audience in clear and accessible language; even where "jargon" threatens, Colin ROBSON is careful to produce either memorable, concise definitions or to break down the concepts into charts of main points. It is obvious that there is good coverage of an incredibly vast literature, more than enough for a whole career of reading, let alone experience. What stands out for me the most, as a reader and reviewer, is that ROBSON tackled a very difficult challenge and did so in a deceptively effortless manner. He provides a solid overview of research traditions and methods, whilst consistently laying down the foundations

of his case for a critical realist approach without ever being pedantic or dogmatic. To put it bluntly then, ROBSON is not one to wear his underwear on the outside. The contribution of this volume to social research in general, quantitative and qualitative, is in its comprehensive nature and its style of presentation. [1]

What also struck me about ROBSON, as author of this large and complex book requiring absolutely rigorous organization and planning, is that he never shows any signs of fatigue. There are no abrupt shifts in writing style. In no section does he suddenly become careless. In fact, each chapter is consistent in style and tone. [2]

Reading and trying to digest this text was both daunting and rewarding, but not without some dissatisfaction, as I shall indicate further on. Nor is this book for everyone. One of the ironies of this very review is that ROBSON's volume almost entirely excludes consideration of any anthropological literatures on methods and yet, the book has fallen into the hands of a reviewer who just happens to be a trained anthropologist. It is inevitable that I shall grind this axe further, not out of disciplinary jealousy, but simply because there is so much rich material that ROBSON has simply ignored. Given this deficit, it is not, as ROBSON might wish to claim, a text that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, psychology and sociology seem to prevail in the literature from which this text draws inspiration. Even when it comes to ethnography, the premier specialization of anthropology, ROBSON still finds a way of focusing on the Chicago school of sociology almost exclusively. That is indeed ironic, as Chicago is also home to one of the world's most prominent anthropology departments—ROBSON only had to take a short walk up the proverbial hallway.[1] [3]

So what is "real world research" and how is critical realism the best way to approach it? This is a critical "double-barreled question" (as ROBSON would be sure to note). In the Preface, ROBSON calls himself: "a self confessed realist (specifically a critical realist)" (p.xi). His stated aim is to provide a text meant to welcome flexible readers who are comfortable with very different views of the nature of the social science enterprise. He suggests, "rapprochement is feasible between the realist framework proposed here and the more forgiving versions of social constructivism" (p.xi). The author indicates in different ways that research in the "real world" concerns real human beings, in real places, acting in real contexts and producing real outcomes—this is research that has escaped the laboratory and the men in white coats. More than that, this is research that can be applied, can itself help to produce a better "real world"—there is an unmistakable concern with policy in this text. Critical realism preserves the essence of "science," seen as a commitment to honesty, systematicity, transparency and accountability in data gathering and analysis. It dissolves the debate between positivism (which ROBSON dismisses) and extreme relativism by being self-

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1   Coincidentally, in none of the four universities in which I have studied has sociology offered courses in ethnography, emphasizing statistics instead. In all of those universities, anthropology focused squarely on ethnography (and I say this to those who may wish to pointedly remind me that "sociologists do ethnography too!"—Yes, some do, but clearly neither as much or for as long as anthropologists have. In anthropology, ethnographic fieldwork is a mandatory requirement, not an "option").

conscious of the researcher as the instrument of measurement/observation on a research project. What I am left wondering is whether this "really" makes ROBSON's approach "really" unique and this leads me to consider some of the critical gaps in his presentation. I do this in a constructive manner for a work that I respect and not in a snarky, perhaps invidious manner that seeks to dismiss. [4]

One of ROBSON's basic contentions (and he is explicitly aware that not all will agree with him) is that research questions are derived from theory and are not just dreamt up. One might reply, nonetheless, "Are not 'real world' research questions derived from 'real world' problems thrown up by 'real world' situations?" Perhaps he might argue that the mere act of defining a situation as problematic is in itself a theoretical exercise, possibly an important point to make to novices. Unfortunately, he does not make that argument. Instead, we are left with ROBSON's somewhat linear approach (see the following section) contrasted with the approaches of action researchers whom he seems to respect as a group, but some of whom would contradict him (see for example WADSWORTH, 1998). [5]

This book describes itself as (pardon the anthropomorphism) a "how-to" cookbook on research in applied settings that also seeks to provide skills for students to conduct research outside of the laboratory in the "real world." Yet, I will argue, the author's first stated aim is one that would have been wise to drop altogether as this is not a "how-to" book in any substantial sense (other than the hype that is used to market it). There is, in fact, very little that tells students, "This is how you do it ... first, do this in this manner"—rather, it is more of an introductory and almost encyclopedic overview of *what* researchers do and why. Rather than a *cookbook*, with recipes and cooking instructions, this is more of a *menu* that describes what people have cooked. I would be very timid about telling a student, "Just read ROBSON's Chapter 'X' and follow what he says to get started." The reasons why I say this should become more apparent in the sections that follow. [6]

The text briskly brushes by what I think is a tricky philosophical question. If your intention is to provide a "how-to" manual (whether you actually achieve this or not is a separate question) and that manual also covers "flexible" research, then does not that by definition transform it into a "fixed design" approach? If you program flexibility, in other words, is not the result fixity? In the extreme, this reminds me of past teachers who, on the one hand, lived by the axiom that "you cannot teach methods: you learn them by doing"—against other teachers, on the other hand, who opined that only the wrong methods are first learned in the field. By this they meant one first makes mistakes in the field, often with no possibility to correct them, thereby sinking one's entire project and potentially alienating informants from future researchers' projects. ROBSON actually does a fairly good job of not being too prescriptive, even while suggesting some tried and tested ideas. [7]

2. Structure and Coverage

ROBSON indicates that this text is about doing your own research and about assisting others to do research and in the most basic and preliminary sense, it may well help one to start achieving these goals. He also states that his motivation is to help those with an action agenda of "wanting to say something helpful" (p.xvi) and this is one of the facets of the book that I considered most laudable. The author clearly indicates his preference for a mixed methods approach, mixing fixed/quantitative and flexible/qualitative methods, although never explicitly indicating to which degree he may weigh one over the other in practice. In outlining this text, he promises to pay some attention to feminist research methodologies. I was perplexed by this, rather than disturbed. He does not tell us why he chose to single out this one social cleavage, that of gender, whilst simply avoiding discussions of class or race/ethnicity. Sometimes, if I may be a little blunt, ROBSON comes across as someone who, perhaps, was badly beaten up by feminists at a conference and never got over the experience. As he left out class and race, he could just as well have dropped gender. [8]

The author pays a great deal of attention to the structure and organization of the text. To facilitate the reader, ROBSON provides numerous inter-chapter cross referencing, thumbnail guides, bullet point introductions to all of the chapters, notes on how to use the book, simple inset boxes highlighting key ideas, a glossary and an extensive bibliography with suggested readings at the end of each chapter. There are some problems that I, as a reader, encountered with this format. Sometimes, the lengths of various inset boxes rival that of the main text that they are supposed to bolster, with boxes running across pages, forcing one to either try in vain to read two parallel sets of text at the same time, or interrupt one reading in favor of the other. Some sections often become a running list of headings and bullet points. Sometimes I thought that there were too many nested inter-chapter and box references, forcing me to jump around this bulky text and losing my place or train of thought. This structure works better on a web site. [9]

The text is divided into four parts, with a total of 15 chapters and two appendices. The first part, "Before You Start" outlines the meaning of "real world enquiry," various approaches to social research and a chapter on "developing your ideas." As ROBSON sees research questions as being primarily theory-driven, it is not jarring to see the text begin in this manner. The second part, "Designing the Enquiry," considers general design issues, fixed designs, flexible designs and designs for particular purposes such as evaluation, action and change. In the third part, he outlines various research tactics, the methods of data collection (with a focus on a range of surveys and questionnaires), interviews, tests and scales, observational methods, and a chapter of "additional methods" of data collection. In the fourth and final part, the author discusses ways of "dealing with the data," meaning the procedures used for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data and ways of reporting on one's enquiry. Appendix A provides some useful guidelines on writing a project proposal (bound to come in handy for many young or novice researchers), while Appendix B outlines some of the roles of practitioner-researchers and researchers and consultants in "real world

research." On the face of it then, the structure of the text is logical and straightforward, mimicking the chronology of the development of the usual research exercise, conceived, at least, in ideal typical terms:

Theory/Questions —› Design —› Data Gathering —› Data Analysis —› Reporting [10]

In the following section I will consider the contents in greater details and, in certain instances, I will also be integrating past reviews published in this very forum, *FQS*. [11]

3. Examination of Contents

ROBSON begins Part I, "Before You Start," with a very brief discussion about negotiating entry to a research site and urges novice researchers to keep complete records of their research. This start struck me as a little awkward or counterintuitive, as one should discuss both elements in far greater detail (as he does in the more appropriate sections). Ideally, in my view at least, he should have commenced by asking the novice researcher, "What do you want to research? Why?" in line with the structure and logic of the text's organization. [12]

In chapter 1, "Real World Enquiry," ROBSON defines real world enquiry and its concern with action for change. The "real world" is not to be found in a laboratory simulation. Research in the real world is concerned with some form of evaluation. Real world research is often applied research or policy research. At this point in the text, I began to wonder what the difference was between real world research and action research. I detected, however, that by real world research he means a range of applied research that incorporates action research, but not always of the radical political kind. When he characterizes real world research in chart form, it has a corporate, governmental and administrative appearance, resorting often to the use of key words such as "sponsors" and "clients." This is more the language of patronage and brokerage rather than partnership, solidarity and emancipation. I must confess that ROBSON's adoption of "real world" immediately put me into a negative state of mind: too many times have I had to confront brass-tackers and bottom-liners who dismiss all academic social research as not being "the real world." In this chapter, ROBSON also outlines a range of methodological options, opening the discussion to the role of the researcher in effecting change; he reminds researchers to write with a consciousness of the intended audience. He also highlights the value of qualitative, flexible designs that, according to him, require less pre-specification as the design evolves and the research proceeds. I found this not untrue, yet a little misleading nonetheless. As an anthropology student, I certainly was required to specify concrete aims and methodology for research proposals, either for the degree or for funding. The pre-specification could be considerable, even though, in practice, one could of course "violate" one's original stated aims. [13]

In chapter 2, "Approaches to Social Research," ROBSON outlines the advantages of what he calls "being scientific." Here he rejects both positivist and

relativist anti-science approaches as two extremes. On the other hand, the stated aim on the back cover of the book does not lead one to believe that any approach would be rejected between the covers. He discusses post-positivism and constructivism, as well as emancipatory approaches, and argues for a synthesis of the three. He begins the chapter with his own take on what constitutes a preferred science rather than first outlining traditional approaches, deconstructing them and salvaging that which he thinks is important. This might have been the more logical way to proceed, especially if communicating to a novice readership. It is clear that he does not wish to "throw out the scientific baby with the positivist bath-water" (p.21). On the other hand, we must take into account the characteristics and perspectives of the observer and the effect that they may have on observation. What his post-positivist commitment also stresses is that there is still a reality that exists independently of what one wishes to think about it, even if it can only ever be known imperfectly and probabilistically. The realist view of science, according to ROBSON, is that there is no unquestionable foundation for science—knowledge is a social and historical product and facts are theory-laden. Realist explanation, furthermore, focuses on actions and their outcomes, the "mechanisms" through which an action causes and outcome and the context(s) which provide the ideal conditions for "triggering" the "mechanism." ROBSON says that he does not mean to sound mechanistic, but, as hard as he tries not to, the diagrammatic representations of this approach are quite linear and mechanical (p.31). It is unfortunate that the term "realism" has been so bandied about in the various social sciences and that it has come to mean everything from hawkish militarism in foreign policy to ROBSON's concern for social policy. When he speaks of entities acting as a function of their basic structure in explaining his focus on mechanisms, I was quickly reminded of 1930s British structural functionalism and I dreaded the thought that, perhaps, ROBSON would be taking us back that way. He stresses that the "new integration" of subjectivist and objectivist approaches in social theory permits us to see social science as being at the same time both the product and the medium of motivated human action. This reminded me, just as quickly, of Anthony GIDDENS' theory of structuration, especially as the language is almost identical. ROBSON's outline of a "pragmatic" approach for "unconvinced" readers struck me as little too ambiguous to be of real value. Sometimes I was left with the impression (as mistaken as that can be), that he was saying, "Oh well, then, just use whatever works for you!" [14]

Chapter 3, "Developing Your Ideas," once more outlines the differences between fixed and flexible designs, a theme that, unfortunately, is the subject of too much repetition throughout the text. He emphasizes basics such as doing background research and the role of theory in developing questions. The latter in itself is interesting, as I mentioned before, since normally one would understand theory as a tool for answering questions, rather than one for asking them; I still retain, however, that there are dangers here (not to be an alarmist) that ROBSON is not addressing. In this chapter, he also raises issues of ethics in research, questionable practices to be avoided and the political arena of real world research. Ethical considerations are laid out in a series of open, non-rhetorical questions—one of the times he does not seem to take an actual stance and

seems almost hesitant. As a reader, I did not feel compelled that there was a strong enough exhortation in this critical area. While he does argue for a combination of fixed and flexible approaches, I wonder if there is any "danger" of "eclecticism" becoming a *third*, iron clad law of research that students will adopt unquestioningly. ROBSON also embraces some new approaches, one being that there is a need for some good experiential knowledge on the part of researchers, which in the past would have been dismissed as "personal bias." In general he argues that problems in search of technique, rather than the reverse, should guide research design. [15]

In Part II, "Designing the Enquiry," ROBSON turns to strategy, or that "general broad orientation taken in addressing research questions." In chapter 4, "General Design Issues," he argues for the linking of theory with research questions, followed by methods and sampling strategy. He provides some very limited examples of fixed, flexible and multiple research strategies—in fact, the lack of any actual, practical exemplars in this text is perhaps one of its more disappointing shortcomings. This is definitely not what one would expect in a text that purports to be a "how-to" cookbook. What ROBSON successfully argues here is that "design is concerned with turning research questions into projects" (p.79). He stresses that pilot work is useful, if not mandatory, as an exploratory first stage in fixed design projects, but neglects to address how pilot studies might be useful generally, in any approach. As an ethnographer, I conducted pilot work and found it to be absolutely critical in helping to make my research project and eventual negotiation of entry successful. What most struck me in terms of the shortcomings of this chapter was ROBSON's labored attempt at distinguishing among the three flexible research designs—case study, ethnography and grounded theory and this seemed quite ambiguous and arbitrary to me. His depiction of ethnography was inadequate: he assumes that ethnographers see themselves as studying defined and bounded groups with a shared culture, which is terribly dated and almost universally rejected in anthropology today. The features of "case study" that he highlights such as "selection of a single case" (where "case" is always rather loosely used), "study of the case in context," and "collection of information via range of data collection techniques including observation, interview and documentary analysis" (p.89) are all true of ethnography as well. In fact, one key handbook in anthropological field methods (see BERNARD, 1995), a classic in the field, helps students to understand and use a very wide range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Unfortunately, this book is nowhere mentioned in ROBSON's otherwise comprehensive and fastidiously documented text. [16]

In chapter 5, "Fixed Designs," the author makes it fairly obvious that by this he means quantitative studies (often experiments) with some degree of control. He also discusses non-experimental fixed designs and this, I thought, was much more in line with his stated preference for "realism." While this chapter is mostly concerned with quantification, he argues, "There is nothing intrinsic to such designs which rules out qualitative methods in data" (p.95). I must say, however, that there is nowhere near enough exposition or demonstration of qualitative fixed designs in his text. In this chapter, ROBSON also discusses principles of validity,

reliability, generalizability, objectivity (in terms of intersubjective agreement) and credibility (explaining why one used certain methods and how). His "trustworthiness of results" section could actually be of use when discussing more or less any kind of social research. It might also have been useful to extract his discussion of respondents' "fatigue effects" and "practice effects" (p.130) and installing it in a more general discussion about research with real people. [17]

Chapter 6, "Flexible Designs," is one of the book's chapters that would be of greater interest to qualitative researchers. While ROBSON claims to prefer the term "flexible" to "qualitative," the fact remains that frequently, when he speaks about flexible designs, he focuses on qualitative research. He should forgive readers who miss his point and see him as simply reinforcing the distinctions of which he claims to be wary. I also detected that his personal concern for quantification filters into the qualitative sections as well. In this chapter, he examines some of the general features of flexible research and the qualities that the researcher needs. ROBSON argues that being systematic, clear and honest are basic premises for a good flexible design researcher. In addition, one needs good questioning and listening skills, adaptiveness and flexibility, a good grasp of the relevant issues, and the almost impossible quality of "lack of prejudice." If research were to be theory-driven, as he argues it should, then that would already be one form of "prejudice"—a question that he does not address. He discusses reliability and validity issues in terms of researcher bias. ROBSON also talks a good deal about reflexivity in relation to one's position in a research setting, one's attitudes and outlooks, the lack of neutrality, and the potential for favoring certain respondents over others on grounds of personal amiability. His analysis of reactivity, respondent bias and researcher bias is in line with the state of the art. The discussion of the problems and advantages of prolonged involvement in the field are also useful, especially for ethnographers. The minimizing of bias and inaccuracy is addressed in terms of peer debriefing, returning to check with informants, an audit trail and a search for alternative cases—also all very useful. [18]

The author then enters more deeply into discussion of what he outlines as the three flexible design traditions—case study, ethnography and grounded theory approaches. Nine pages are devoted to the fairly ambiguous "case study" approach. Indeed, ROBSON's attempt at a definition left much to be desired: "Case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (p.178). This is more or less true of all qualitative approaches considered in the text. In fact, no distinctive methods are mentioned, until he comes to ethnography and this subject gets only five pages. All three traditions, in fact, involve some form of participation and observation, with the potential for varying degrees of self-consciousness as a participant observer. Thus, all three approaches might have been subsumed under the heading of "ethnography" and, with a few chapters on statistical data gathering methods, we would be right back to BERNARD's (1995) handbook. When ROBSON argues that "site" might be preferable to "case" (p.179), I wondered, is this just another way of simply saying "field research?" When he states, "The

'case' can be virtually anything" (p.180) and "every enquiry is a kind of case study" (p.185), I start to feel a little exasperated. I am forced to conclude that if everything is case study, nothing is case study and that it might be completely dropped. Moreover, there is absolutely no "how-to" element in his discussion of "case study"—he spends the entire time just trying to define it. Novice researchers may be left perplexed or unimpressed. When ROBSON talks about "planned study" (p.184), I also wonder if this can be distinguished from fixed design. His consideration of debates raging amongst ethnographers was a little narrow and dated, reducing these to the researcher's problems of changing the situation s/he is researching or of "going native" (p.186). For some of these debates concerning how the field is conceptually constructed as a unit of analysis, I suggest AMIT (2000). I think that what struck me most negatively about this chapter, along the lines that I have already discussed, is the sometimes-astounding misrepresentation of ethnography and ethnographers. ROBSON makes the surprising claim that "some ethnographers display a general distrust of theorizing" (p.186)—but he provides no references for this. From experience, I know that that there may be too few cases worth mentioning. I was disturbed by the way he wielded his "real world sword" by virtually dismissing ethnography, saying that it is "highly unrealistic for virtually all real world studies" (p.187) because ethnographers are required to spend "years" in the field. This assertion is quite worthy of being discarded altogether. A fieldwork period that lasts years is, in fact, both financially and institutionally impossible in the vast majority of cases and it is exceedingly rare to find anyone who has had this privilege. First of all, the standard time is one year on average for most doctoral candidates and senior academics are usually lucky to get a few months (unless on a sabbatical). Secondly, no funding body that I know of will fund an individual to be in the field for "years," nor do I know of universities that are willing to release teaching staff for so long. When ROBSON adds, "The focus of ethnographic study is a group who share a culture" (p.187), I realized that his exposure to ethnography is hopelessly out of date. Then again, almost his entire focus on ethnography comes from the Chicago school of sociology; barely one anthropologist (apart from the now ancient William Foote WHYTE) gets any mention in the text. As anyone can tell, this is where the book fell utterly flat in my eyes. If ROBSON intends to produce a third edition, he will have a lot more work to do to make this book marketable with anthropologists. Until then, I believe one may rightly suspect that ethnography is not a *forte* of ROBSON's. For a more useful guide to field projects in anthropology see the modest, brief and yet very workable handbook by CRANE and ANGROSINO (1984). For a classic introduction to anthropological field research, see EPSTEIN (1967). For case studies in field methods see CRICK and GEDDES (1993), and PERRY (1989) for some personal accounts. [19]

In Chapter 7, "Designs for Particular Purposes: Evaluation, Action and Change," ROBSON considers the uses of research findings in effecting some difference in the real world. This chapter is generally useful for considering the politics of evaluation and the ethical problems of client-funded research, urging us to critically examine whose interests are being vested in the research and how the

research findings may be misused (i.e., as in whitewash). ROBSON's overview of action research is fairly standard and perhaps a little thin. [20]

Part III, "The Methods of Data Collection" turns the reader's attention to the actual tactics used to gain data. ROBSON begins this section with chapter 8, "Surveys and Questionnaires." This is potentially a vast and complex area; I still recall introductory texts that were entirely devoted to the subject, yet insufficient. Here ROBSON simply provides the merest of overviews, ranging from survey characteristics and their advantages and disadvantages to questions of self-completion of questionnaires, face-to-face administration of the survey instrument and telephone interviews. He discusses the stages in carrying out a sample survey and the development and use of questionnaires. Moreover, he examines the "why" and "how" of sampling. ROBSON also asks some good questions of qualitative relevance, with respect to respondent behavior, for example, respondents trying to give the answers that they think will make them appear in a good light. Finally, the author argues that all generalist real world researchers should be able to offer a survey (p.232). [21]

In chapter 9, "Interviews," ROBSON enters into a critical field of qualitative research. Much of this material is of the standard variety: different types and structures of interviews, the circumstances surrounding interviews, and the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing, along with some general advice on questions to avoid. He discusses structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews at some length, as well as focus group interviews and the different phases of the interview process. His sections on interview tactics are quite good. He presents material on the advantages of focus groups, showing the strengths offered by group dynamics, the large amounts of data that can be collected, the checks and balances imposed by members of the group on each other, and how the process can be less intimidating for participants. He actually converted me to this tactic and I regret not having used it before. Amongst the relatively few shortcomings of this chapter, I would include his formulaic and prescriptive way of talking about "questions to avoid" (p.275). He completely neglects any discussion of how "leading" or "biased" questions (he does not make clear why he separates the two) can, in fact, be useful and richly rewarding. In the "real world," one's informants often have to deal with biased, prejudiced and even hostile social actors. Verbalizing this conflict can bring out rich insights; sometimes, the leading question is the ideal way of eliciting that conflict. In other words, novices should be encouraged to use some common sense and tact while also playing the situation by ear. I will largely bypass discussion of chapter 10, "Tests and Scales", as this again is fairly standard material, competently covered. [22]

Chapter 11, "Observational Methods," covers such areas as structured observation, participant observation, the role of observation in real world research, observational biases, different types of participant observer roles, recording methods and, finally, the reliability of structured observation. ROBSON seems to agree with the idea that "saying is one thing, doing is another" and thus seems to implicitly support that what one can see people doing is somehow more valid as data than what people say. This would be the wrong message to send to

novices. He goes further by arguing, "Observation also seems to be pre-eminently the appropriate technique for getting at 'real life' in the real world" (p.310). Again, I am not certain that this needs to be said or that a solid argument can be made to support it without embracing old-fashioned positivism. When it comes to ethnography, ROBSON consigns participant observation to work done in small groups. This evades current debates about the redevelopment of participant observation in large-scale structures, such as the state, even the world-system [see for example KNOWLES (2000) and MARCUS (1986, 1995)]. He seems to suggest that participant observation is a technique for getting total data on all members of a group rather than getting a sense of totalities themselves and the material and ideational processes that constitute them, which is far more interesting. Unfortunately, there is insufficient discussion of the role, nature and meanings of field notes and ROBSON, therefore, completely excludes one of the classics in this field (SANJEK, 1990). He does have an engaging discussion on the role of interpersonal factors that can affect a researcher, such as coddling favorite informants, personal bias and personal insecurity. Perhaps a few anecdotes from the field could have really driven this home. ROBSON also pays necessary attention to the construct of the observer being observed by the observed and the effects that this can have on a research project, however remote and neutral one may imagine him or herself to be. The observer observed thus becomes a participant in the action observed. ROBSON might have brought in some of the prominent materials of wider relevance to this subject (i.e., STOCKING, 1983). ROBSON is quite adept at providing one of the more useful coding overviews that I have encountered. Although he is quite good at showing some past successes and failures associated with certain techniques, I feel that some "unreal world" assumptions linger. Too often we think of ourselves as potential "contaminants" to a "pure" situation, as if we were back in the lab, only with dirty hands. The "real world," however, is often composed of individuals and groups who have been routinely observed and interviewed by past researchers, students, journalists and so forth. We become, often, just another familiar 'unfamiliar' face. I have dealt with informants who are so battle-hardened that speaking on camera produces nary a wrinkle; they have dealt with so many interviewers and field workers that, even a week after the researcher's departure, they can no longer remember the person's name. One feature is that, in the real world, we, as researchers, often count for very little. Perhaps we need to remember to cut ourselves down to size in our own self-imaginings. [23]

In chapter 12, "Additional Methods of Data Collection," ROBSON examines unobtrusive measures and indirect observation in the form of documentary analysis, content analysis and archival analysis. He has also provides a fairly competent overview of accretion measures and erosion measures; good pointers on content analysis; and a fairly strong section on what some call source criticism: knowing the authors, intended audiences, contexts and interests behind a document, since documents in archives are not plain facts that just speak for themselves. The field of ethno-historic methods also covers many of these issues. He stresses that researching documentary sources is a good complement to other research methods, especially since these sources are not reactive. Besides being a complement, I would add that it might even be essential.

Knowing how something took the shape that it has tells us a lot about that shape and its central features—process, after all, is temporal. We cannot pretend to have a good understanding of an event, group or situation because what we witness in the field is often partial, incomplete or lacking in some of the non-recursive events that we may have missed. In my case, "all the good stuff" always seems to happen when I am away from the field. A question he does not ask, that the novice might, is whether there is a qualitative form of content analysis, since his coverage stresses coding and counting. I am also not certain that ROBSON should have included so much material on software packages. First, these often come with their own manuals and there is no real "secret" that needs to be uncovered in a book like this. Secondly, software is always changing and I can never seem to appreciate the purpose of writing about it in print; this is better left for a web site (indeed, this book could have done with a companion web site). His coverage of discourse analysis is a little too thin and somewhat dull. His discussion of feminist research methods bounced up against familiar questions, i.e., are there any? ROBSON includes a section on feminist methods, but he does not think there are any yet. "There is considerable virtue for real world research in taking on board feminist proposals—particularly in acknowledging the emotional aspects of doing real world research and the value of emphasizing commitment as against detachment" (p.370). This can, of course, be taken the wrong way: it can sound like, "you know those women, ever so emotional and nurturing," which seems to stereotype women in a way that one would think feminists would want to avoid (or maybe not). Either way, including this section did not enrich the discussion or it has the unfortunate effect of appearing to be paying political dues, possibly at the expense of the attention span of the novice reader. [24]

This chapter ends with a series of excellent checklists for arranging the practicalities of research. I would recommend this as must reading for all novice researchers, whether in an academic setting or not. Perhaps students should be drilled in these procedures, concerning negotiation of consent, ethics and commitments to informants and should commit them to memory, if not heart. It saddens me that, even in my comparatively limited experience, I have already witnessed student researchers who conduct their projects in an ad hoc fashion. They seem sometimes insensitive to the rights of informants and behave as if they have a God-given right to ask and know whatever they want, with the implicit suggestion that informants must act as their ever-willing servants. At least academic institutions should better supervise their students in the field, possibly instituting mechanisms for "pulling" a student when this occurs. I would have been interested in ROBSON's take on this issue. [25]

Part IV, "Dealing with Data" covers the guidelines and principles used in selecting appropriate procedures for data analysis, whilst examining questions of how the results obtained might be interpreted. [26]

Chapter 13, "The Analysis of Quantitative Data," covers such topics as: using specialized software packages for data analysis (although ROBSON does not mention the many automated web sites—for example, the very wide selection of

interactive statistical calculation pages listed at
http://members.aol.com/johnp71/javastat.html, and the probability and statistics
resources available at http://ubmail.ubalt.edu/~harsham/statistics/REFSTAT.HTM
—that will do this for free now); creating data sets for entry into a computer;
exploratory and confirmatory data analysis; determinations of statistical
significance; the discovery of relationships between various measurements and
so forth. Even an anthropological handbook such as BERNARD (1995) covers
these issues in equally good detail and with some concrete ways of actually
learning the statistical calculations. ROBSON argues, "You would have to work
quite hard in an enquiry not to generate at least some data that were in the form
of numbers, or could easily be turned into numbers of some kind" (p.391). I would
say, sure, but should numbers form an essential part of the description and
analysis? And having some basic numbers, do we need to dive deep into
statistical analyses? In other words, I personally think that it would be bad advice
to the novice that if you have numbers you should try doing something statistical
with them. This is not necessary and it depends on one's questions and
approach. I am not so certain that ROBSON would disagree with this statement
either. [27]

Chapter 14, "The Analysis of Qualitative Data," includes discussion of systematic
analysis; the problems of the human as analyst; specialist computer software
such as NUD*IST (I have never personally used it and I did not find ROBSON's
description to be very inviting, nor was I left feeling that I had missed out on
something special); the management of raw data; and, alternative approaches to
data analysis apart from those of three main qualitative traditions—case study,
ethnography, and grounded theory—as laid out by ROBSON. He also covers
quasi-statistical approaches, template approaches, editing approaches and
immersion approaches. What left me uneasy was how ROBSON never lets
qualitative research be simply qualitative: even here he has to find a way of
injecting statistics and software-driven analysis. In part, this seems to be the
product of being haunted by the ghost of old science. It even seems to come out
in some of his statements: "For those who do wish to work within the kind of
scientific framework advocated in this book and who wish to persuade scientific
or policy-making audiences, there are ways in which qualitative data can be dealt
with systematically" (p.456). He is keen to outline the deficiencies of the human
as analyst: data overload; first impressions; information availability (the
researcher focusing on that which is easier to obtain—mention of how the
Internet is changing research would have been good here); positive instances
(data which supports one's views); internal consistency (discounting the novel
and unusual); uneven reliability (some sources are more reliable); missing
information; revision of hypotheses (over- or under-reaction to new circumstances
or information); over-confidence in one's judgment; co-occurrence (mistaken
evidence of correlation), inconsistency; and, guidelines for how to address and
minimize these problems. This is actually some of the most thorough material I
have encountered on this particular topic. Once again, ROBSON's text would
have been better served by simply dropping "case study data analysis," for as
ROBSON himself says, "A case study does not, in itself, call for a particular
approach to the analysis of the qualitative data which it produces" (p.473). If not,

why bother mentioning it? Elephantine in size already, he should have looked for easy ways of putting this book on a diet. Lastly, some of his pointers for analyzing data are a bit too common sense, i.e., "thinking." [28]

The final chapter, "Reporting the Enquiry," covers basic material, but in a manner so well organized and thorough that it renders it useful and important reading. One of the features that I like most in this chapter is his overview of different reporting styles: suspense structure, narrative report, comparative structure, chronological structure and theory-generating structures. I believe that he might have consulted more of the extant literature on ethnographic writing—crucial, engaging and contentious as it is (see for example, CLIFFORD, 1980, 1977; CRAPANZANO, 1977). In *FQS* itself, GAITÁN (2000), gives a generally favorable review of Carolyn ELLIS and Arthur BOCHNER's (1996) volume concerning alternative forms of writing ethnography that gives far greater space to these issues than ROBSON can afford here. [29]

ROBSON seems to agree with the view that the reader ought to know more about the "muddy hands and grubby boots" aspect of doing fieldwork (p.508). I doubt, regrettably, that there is much demand for this and often anthropologists minimize this. Indeed, I have personally been told by reviewers that this is not of interest and is best reserved for journals specializing in methods. Under the various alternative forms of presentation, ROBSON completely omits web sites where so much useful and engaging ethnographic material is appearing on the Web. [30]

4. General Problems

I have covered several particular problems in the text in the course of this review. In this section, I want to focus on what I, as one solitary and subjective reader, think are some of the overarching and underlying problems in this text. I present these in no particular order of importance. First, let me begin where I just left off. In many ways this is still a pre-1990s text insofar as it completely excludes any discussion whatsoever of "virtual research" or "cyber ethnography" (see, in contrast, HINE, 2000; MILLER & SLATER 2000). More than that, the whole field of "visual research methods" remains largely invisible in this text. In contrast, see MULLEN's (2001) review of Sarah Pink's *Doing Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research* (2001). [31]

Secondly, the author gets into some no-win situations. He broaches debates (for example, between positivists and relativists), yet keeps these to a tranquil minimum. This can, a) prevent students from being sucked into dead end debates, but can also, b) not enable them to dwell on the sometimes profound implications of these debates, thereby reducing their own necessary self-consciousness about what they are doing as researchers. ROBSON is thus confronted with the difficulty of appeasing senior readers, who are spying on this book, and informing the novice at the same time. He seems to try to appease specialist cliques, by laboring definitions, distinctions and so forth, whilst talking to novices who may just be more interested in "getting on with it." [32]

Binary pairs in the work abound, centered on fixed versus flexible, quantitative versus qualitative, formal versus informal, structured versus unstructured, science versus advocacy and the like. I ended up wondering, "Is this at all useful for the novice?" and "For the uninitiated and the layman, do they really need to inherit our history of often dead-end academic debates?" Possibly, ROBSON should have stuck more doggedly to his aim of helping people to answer questions by whatever means seem necessary, which would make these formulaic oppositional schemes less relevant, even less interesting. Unfortunately, he would then probably not have been able to push forth his argument for critical realism, which is one of the themes underpinning this text. [33]

Thirdly, ROBSON cannot be faulted for blowing his own horn. He writes in a modest and detached manner, somewhat like an observer. Therein lies another problem, one that he might consider to be a grave one after having read his text. He does not tell us how he *knows* a particular strategy or tactic to be useful or flawed. Is it just from reading? Could he not have injected some of his own personal experiences as a researcher? These, inevitably, color some of his perceptions and analyses; he really does owe the reader some insight into his own experiences. [34]

Fourth and related to the last, there is too much in the text of simply pointing a student towards the works of others in search of concrete examples of research methods, without even the slimmest summary or a good case study to exemplify an approach. This is one of the biggest drawbacks, I think, for any text that is touted as a "how-to" cookbook. This contrasts with Benjamin CRABTREE and William MILLER's *Doing Qualitative Research* (1999), as reviewed in *FQS* itself by BARNETT (2002), where she reports that the text provides detailed exemplars of real research problems and suggestions for solutions that are invaluable. [35]

Fifth, for a "realist," he leaves out much (not all) of the messiness and conflict that can envelop a researcher in a *really* real world: racism, nationalism, demands for money, internally divided groups, social conflict and unrest, serendipity, and so forth. This is still a largely sanitized approach that ROBSON offers. Real world research might very well include a chapter on "research in conditions of chaos and conflict." As chaos and conflict unfortunately scar so many, if not most, of the world's societies, these very facts may have *really* made the text marketable, as cynical as this inevitably sounds. [36]

Not entirely unrelated to the last point, ROBSON might have talked about what a researcher should do when informants ask for monetary compensation in return for recorded interviews or filmed events. In addition, what does he have to say about researchers sharing copyright for recorded products? [37]

Sixth and in line with my criticisms of the text where ethnography is concerned, I would have liked to see more about oral history. In addition, there was little or no attention paid to "hanging out," conversing and other very informal modes of conducting fieldwork. Formality and structure win out in this text. [38]

Seventh and as I intimated before, the prestige of "science" still seems to hang over ROBSON. As he states in telling language, "Realism is an attractive choice for those doing social research who wish to characterize what they are doing as scientific" (p.29). This is, arguably, an unfortunate way of posing the issue, as it sounds at least slightly driven by a concern for labels and self-image. [39]

Finally, in terms of space and organization, ROBSON always gives the fixed and the quantitative first preference and greater coverage than the flexible and the qualitative. This can give the false impression that the fixed and quantitative is "real science" and is, therefore, the more important or prestigious first Choice over the qualitative and the flexible, which are murky and more prone to human "deficiencies." [40]

5. Conclusion

If I had to adopt a perspective on how "real world research" ought to be defined, I would largely agree with ROBSON. Real world research is *with*, *among* and *for* "real people" and not the human equivalent of laboratory rats, nor research solely of library materials, census records, controlled situations and the like. Nonetheless, I would be differing with ROBSON in one respect: my approach would automatically exclude fixed-design experimental research. One can also argue with some effort, that all qualitative, flexible research is essentially ethnographic, especially as ethnographies these days are built upon mixed methods anyway. Quantitative fixed research can also be a tool of ethnography— think of anthropological surveys and also think of how statistics are now included in some of the key methods texts taught to anthropology students. If we take this approach, however, we then just end up once more with BERNARD's already existing handbook. ROBSON provides an important exception, however: he easily covers a far greater range of strategies and tactics. [41]

ROBSON's great strengths are his writing style, overall breadth of coverage and organization—huge elements needed for any book to be judged a success. This is an expert who does not intimidate or pontificate to the reader. Where the book has shortcomings—and this is only my view (unless we find intersubjective agreement amongst a greater number of readers)—is in terms of some content depth, accuracy in some cases, timeliness, as well as the general lack of practical exemplars and testimonies. [42]

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Citation

Forte, Maximilian C. (2002). Is it Real? Problems and Prospects of Research in "the Real World."
Review Essay, Colin Robson (2002). Real World Research. A Resource for Social Scientists and
Practitioner-Researchers [42 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative
Social Research*, *3*(4), Art 47, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0204471.

Revised 2/2007