

Review:

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**Heather D'Cruz & Martyn Jones (2004). Social Work Research—
Ethical and Political Contexts.** London: Sage, ISBN 0-7619-4971-2, £ 17.99

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Abstract: This book is about doing social work research and comes straight from its authors' practices as social work teachers. Well written, it tackles most of the wide-ranging topics in qualitative and quantitative research. Not politically neutral, the book has a clear bias, advocating for the marginalised and dispossessed. Its politics are not overbearing, however, and the quality of much of the material is excellent.

It was a great pleasure to review this stimulating and interesting book, although frustrating, too, because it made me at times hopeful that it would go further in its range and coverage than it did. In sum, it is a well structured book and each chapter has an introduction and a final summary of the main points.

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1. Introduction

It might be important for the reader of this review who does not come from the UK to understand a bit about the background and current trends in British social work. The issue of social exclusion and the need for social inclusion of marginalised parts of the population comprise a major policy plank and form an important background to current UK government initiatives. This background is very strongly reflected in this book, though the language itself is markedly different from that of current government policy in the UK. Concurrently and for the same reasons, there has been a relentless drive to base all public sector work on evidence and hence the role of research evidence has greatly increased. At the same time that individual pieces of work are less powerful, meta-analytic studies and literature reviews are informing daily practice more frequently. From

that point of view the book is almost dissonant with the increasingly dominant practices within policy making. Intended as a text for students who have to learn about research, however, it is pitched at just the right level and very well written. [1]

A few words about the review and the reviewer: The review provides a critical overview on each chapter followed by some general comments and a concluding summary comment that draws it all together. My background is in medicine and psychotherapy which inevitably is reflected in this review. I have always been drawn to a need for contextual understanding which probably was my way of dealing with the universal mystification of post-war German youths in the face of an unspeakable past. [2]

2. No Knowledge without Research

Chapter one sets out the aims of the book, starting with the intent to address fears and misconceptions about research that may exist amongst many social workers. I found this interesting because similar fears apply to many professional disciplines where research and evidence are important. It showed me that the response to such common misperceptions needs to be specific to the particular context. Here, the main argument is that social work research has to be compliant with social work standards of reflective practice and the need to ensure that social work research, social work practice and social work theory are linked, rather than split off from one another. The obvious argument for research—namely that it will contribute to knowledge, and challenge assumptions, contribute to needs assessment and give feedback to the profession—is balanced by the persuasive argument that social work research can powerfully influence policies and generally can be a useful tool for change and improvement. The conclusion is that social work research needs to be understood as contextualised and embedded in practice. There can be, therefore, no false assumption of pseudo-scientific "objectivity" of absolute truth. [3]

3. How to Develop a Good Research Question and a Good Research Project

Chapter two focuses on the issue of the research question. It is assumed that social work has a unique commitment to contextual understanding of people and a value base that emphasises human rights and commitment to serving the marginalised and oppressed. The authors stress that it is useful to refer to these values and principles as the foundations of social work (which they, incidentally, do not critically examine). These assumptions, while necessary, are not sufficient to guide people to the formulation of good research questions. [4]

The authors—in my view very appropriately—emphasise the importance of clarifying the research question to the point that it really becomes a question that is possible to answer. They emphasise that questions need to act as guides towards feasible projects—projects of relevance, researchable issues and facilitative of ethical research conduct. Furthermore, the authors emphasise the necessity for the inclusion of a reflective appreciation of the researcher's personal

location. This is important both in relation to the research question and in relation to those to be researched. "Participation" (as in participative research) can be not only useful, but also unsettling because it potentially gives away the power of the researcher. At the same time negotiations with gatekeepers of funding, permission, or of strategic objectives might require ever increasing negotiation skills by researchers. The authors give a useful outline of how to put together a research project which: a) includes a review of the literature and evidence base; b) identifies what the research project might add to the knowledge base; and c) clarifies the research question and locates it within its social context. All of this is explained in useful detail. [5]

4. How Does Research Contribute to Knowledge: Different Ways of Knowing

Chapter three explores what the authors call "different ways of knowing and their relevance for research". It defines what a paradigm is and sets out a number of different ways of thinking about paradigms and their political and ethical aspects. This is done fairly thoroughly and with numerous examples and exercises which readers can do by themselves. [6]

Personally I am very fond of qualitative research methodologies and the knowledge they can deliver. However this chapter was the first place in the book (and there were a couple more) where I felt a subtle bias in favour of qualitative methods and a slightly insufficient appreciation of the contribution of quantitative methods. This might be more reflective of my own professional position as a reader of this book, but I also believe that the comparative description and teaching of different methodologies requires high levels of integrity and an acknowledgement of any personal bias. Overall the personal bias is acknowledged in the book as a reflection of the authors' expertise, not so much as their preference. This is not a criticism, merely a comment because it is impossible to be impartial in life, and this book rather splendidly acknowledges that explicitly. [7]

I found particularly helpful the comparison of three different paradigms across a set of assumptions called "cosmological", "ontological" and "epistemological" which create different views in perceived reality. A positivist, interpretivist or feminist paradigm will reflect differently against cosmological, ontological or epistemological assumptions/views. For instance, cosmological assumption of the feminist according to the book is that (social) reality is created by human beings whose central organising process is gender. An ontological assumption from an interpretivist perspective is that behaviour is intentional and creative and can be explained but not predicted. An epistemological example of the same would be that knowledge rises from interpretation and insight and requires in depth interviewing, participant observation, and other qualitative methods in order to be fully appreciated. [8]

Next, the authors cover in detail the question of "colonialism" in research and the "colonising" tendencies of research coming out of Western industrialised nations.

This is the very first time I have come across this in a research book! I found it very interesting from a historical perspective and it resonated with my own views about colonialism. However, I also found this less helpful, although I have no problem in agreeing with much of what the authors are trying to say. The argument seemed backward-looking (guilt-based?) in an attempt to "undo" the effects of colonialism, rather than finding a way forward out of a situation in which we jointly ended up, at times, producing strong identities with victims (helpless rage) and perpetrators (guilt and abusive power). However, what this debate of colonial tendencies in research drives home forcefully is that there is no place anywhere in human interaction—including research—that remains neutral about any human issue of social or historical relevance. [9]

5. The Researcher's Beliefs Are Linked to Research Outcome by the Chosen Methodology

The next three chapters (four, five and six) offer an introduction to research methodology. Chapter four takes the reader through the various aspects of validity and contrasts quantitative and qualitative approaches with each other. It refreshingly offers this debate as one of complementary, rather than contradictory, points of view. It delineates reasonably clearly the various aspects of quantitative and qualitative research:

1. The authors state that qualitative research is understood differently by its contribution to research design: It can be a preparatory element for a quantitative component of a project (generation of hypotheses or of constructs), or a quantitative element can become the preparation for a qualitative study which looks at some specific area of meaning (p.62).
2. The authors outline in detail how the researcher's relationship with research informants and the topic itself is informed by the researcher's images of social reality, (e.g., a feminist, positivist, or any other paradigm). Thus the researcher is acknowledged as an active agent in knowledge construction, rather than as an external actor (p.63).
3. Quantitative research uses hypotheses as part of its "hypothetico-deductive" method, whereas qualitative research is said to rely on "emergent theories from life or grounded in human experience" (p.63).
4. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are further differentiated according to the degree of structure in data generation, with more structured approaches being suited to statistical testing, whereas qualitative approaches offer more depth but less numbers and need to be less structured (pp.63f).
5. Quantitative research aims at producing findings that can be generalised (mostly to populations), whereas qualitative research looks at alternate ways of generating theory about human experiences and their contexts (p.64). [10]

"Criticisms" of quantitative and qualitative approaches are listed in a table and refreshingly reflect the commonly held prejudices. While all this is very useful, to my mind the description of qualitative research would have benefited from a more

clearly defined differentiation of the various qualitative methodologies and their particular utility as can be found in BURCK (2005). [11]

Personally I felt at risk of losing myself in a warren of multiplexes of subjectivities and inter-subjectivities. This is not an unfamiliar sense in this particular literature, even with its best and most interesting contributions (e.g., METCALF, 2004). [12]

The expectation that all research should be "emancipatory" in its practice felt slightly unrealistic in that this is not always desired by the research participants and it is not always possible to fully share all research knowledge obtained as part of a project with its participants. Nonetheless, it is possible to expect social work students to undertake research where it is possible in order for them to have this experience. A social worker at the frontline, however, will also need the skill of using their expertness and knowledge in critical situations in order to provide guidance where people simply cannot cope with any attempt at emancipation and empowerment, other than pure help. [13]

I also felt that there was—despite the emphasis on complementarity—some polarisation between quantitative methods and qualitative methods with a fairly marked reductionist effect. Quantitative researchers such as Urie BRONFENBRENNER (1979) have long since emphasised the need for contextual considerations in all quantitative research in order for a valid interpretation of results to be possible [14]

The book also offers a sub-section on "de-colonising methodologies". This might particularly reflect the British or Anglo-Saxon context, though many European cultures own some colonial pasts. In terms of the political dimensions, it might have been also useful to develop the argument of the changing utility and value of research in relation to funding and research practices as, for example, developed by Franz BREUER, Jo REICHERTZ and Wolff-Michael ROTH in their introductory comments to the debate on [Quality of Qualitative Research](#) in FQS. However, the theme of colonisation clearly underlines that there always is a link between a researcher's beliefs about a research issue to be explored and the available knowledge within the dominant context. [15]

6. Designing Research Is Part of the Research Process Itself

Chapter five addresses the question of research design and very helpfully takes the reader through the creation of a fit between the particular views of the researcher, the research question and the research methodology and design. It includes some material on actual research as a means of bringing about change and also addresses methods of evaluation and how to design evaluative research. The reader is invited to put her/himself in the shoes of someone who is asked to participate in a research study with a series of questions. This device enabled me to think about how I might want to be approached in order to foster my willingness to participate in research myself. [16]

Practical issues are addressed, (e.g., the need for an advisory group, a realistic time table, the consideration of any implications of particular choices of research design etc.). Of particular relevance to me was the warning that it is easy to get captured by one's own research design (e.g., in an action research project). The principles for some common tasks get spelled out in detail, such as the design of a needs assessment, an evaluation or choices of sampling. The latter expressly includes snowballing techniques, which made me aware that there was no mention anywhere of the methodology of social network analysis. I remain undecided whether to see this as a serious omission or a wise economy in a book that is limited in scope by necessity. [17]

7. Data, Data, Data: How to Collect (and How to Analyse) it—And How to Tell the World about It

Chapter six is focused on generating data by interview, by questionnaires, (including the issue of questionnaire development), observation, oral history, autobiographical and other narrative approaches, and the use of secondary data. The chapter looks at the possibility of combining data-generating methodologies, but also acknowledges very explicitly that data generation always happens from a position of power. There are nice gems that help understand different effects of formulating research questions. For instance the question, "Why are there so many black children in Britain in foster care?" is contrasted with asking, "What are the processes that involved the entry of black children into care in Britain?" Obviously the way the question is formulated will produce a different outcome and a different contribution to the knowledge base. [18]

Chapter seven focuses on data analysis and begins with triangulation, a crucial method for creating complementary datasets. Triangulation can protect against over-simplistic misinterpretation of data. The authors then acknowledge their limitations in being able to provide advice on quantitative data analysis. After an initial basic exposition of statistical concepts, they refer the reader to statistical reference books. The details on qualitative data analysis cover different paradigms, contrasting methodologies such as ethnography, narrative analysis, discourse analysis and analytical induction. The chapter is, by necessity, somewhat long and a bit more complex than other chapters; it would be even more overwhelmingly long if it included details of statistical methodologies. I found reading it stimulating and helpful, though I was acutely aware that somehow qualitative research methodology does not yet seem to have fully come of age in terms of its conceptual clarity, and has not yet fully developed its potential of contributing to knowledge. I found the occasional instance where there were some ideological assumptions without critical examination, such as the postulate that "one needs to take into account in one's analysis of how to work in a participatory and emancipatory way using research as another social work strategy" (D'CRUZ & JONES, p.110). I could not help but have a slightly allergic reaction against such statements, although this is not a fundamental criticism of the book or this chapter or a disagreement. This is just one example of a few such instances dotted around the book where the authors' bias shows in ways that left me a little uneasy. [19]

Chapter eight "Reporting and Disseminating Research" starts with the assumption that social work research tends to be more often applied because of its very nature than is the case in other areas of research enquiry. It summarises questions of dissemination and reporting and the question of impact, including the observation that much research does not always have much of an impact. [20]

Finally: There is an extensive list of references at the end which I checked and that seems to be carefully edited and reasonably reliable. I also found the index helpful although, as is commonly the case with most books, there was no index of authors, which would have been useful. [21]

8. Concluding Comments

1. The nature of research

Whenever I read across disciplines and am immersed in a perspective other than the one that is familiar to me and my work, I feel sad that we seem to lack the capacity to put a proper overview together. I felt greatly stimulated by this book and thought it would just be wonderful if it could provide an overview and critical appreciation of the whole issue of research from a social perspective. In my mind, I found myself drawn back to thinking about the writings of Alfred SOHN-RETHEL (1978) who has most concisely formulated the role of abstraction in knowledge as the basis for being able to teach it. This obviously is also of relevance to research that is about the methodology of knowledge abstraction. There is more than one useful link one can make in one's own mind about this; for example, SOHN-RETHEL (1990) very eruditely and eloquently writes about money (another form of abstraction, in this case, of human values), but in a very special form of social concretisation which makes what is abstracted very concrete and very real, so that we all depend on it. Yet money, just like any abstract numbers, remains totally dependent on our human capacity to believe in it. These "abstractions", therefore, become quintessentially psychological constructs, dependant upon our capacity to believe in them as a currency of social discourse, which turns them into realities of a different kind: they are real because they impact upon our lives. [22]

2. The social perspective

My thinking is very influenced by a social perspective which is probably why I volunteered to review this book. This might be seen as unusual for a medic, especially in an Anglo-Saxon context. This derives from my desire to socially contextualise the predominant individualising of medicine and psychology that are now contributing to the exclusion of the family from our professional capacity to think about people, let alone work with people in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The concept of family has now been replaced with the concept of "user and carer" and especially "young carer" or, in the USA, more blatantly, with the concept of "consumer". Consumer then, is the one who pays for treatment or social care, be it directly or through tax dollars. It would be very nice if we had a context in which we could put together these different perspectives without losing the focus. Reading this book has, to some degree, enabled me to do that. [23]

3. The psychology of research

I always find it important—particularly with young trainees who have to do research as part of a training programme, but who have no ambition to pursue a research career—to emphasise that they must have a passion for the question that they have chosen for their research topic. I spend a lot of time reinforcing that passion as a means of seeing them through the frustrations of their research work (be it qualitatively or quantitatively) to help them to achieve a satisfactory outcome, rather than join the large number of students whose careers are littered with unfinished research and other projects. Behind this is my fundamental belief that research ultimately is a projection of the researcher on to the world in a way that is fundamentally personal. This reflects the influences of Carl Gustav JUNG and Ignacio MATTE BLANCO (1998) on my thinking. [24]

For instance, Kekulé's discovery of the aromatic carbon ring came out of a dream about six intertwined snakes. For the psychotherapist this is as telling about the personal psychology of Kekulé as it is interesting to know how his discovery was made. The discovery was made because a unique resonance between Kekulé's personality and the research question he was engaged in occurred which allowed for knowledge to emerge. I tend to think about generalised knowledge as an abstraction that we can project on to the concrete world around us. In my mind this psychological perspective assists in understanding the nature of knowledge and its application. In turn this also creates a different context for an understanding of culturally determined belief systems and how one needs to acknowledge them in oneself, how one has limits in acknowledging them within oneself and how they might be possible to work with. [25]

4. Summary

In summary I found reviewing this book very rewarding. It is a little book with limited scope, but one that I thoroughly enjoyed reading and that I recommend as a reinforcement of inspired research teaching in a variety of contexts. It certainly should serve well as a textbook for social work students. I have not come across any similar book in my work, however, my knowledge of the field is limited. [26]

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