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Book review

Doing a Successful Research Project: Using Qualitative or Quantitative Methods (2014), Martin Brett Davies, M and Hughes, N. (2nd edition) ISBN 9781 137306425, Palgrave Macmillan

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Social work research is concerned with what social work does, and how it does it; the theoretical bases for its work, and the issues and outcomes from applying these; the nature of knowledge and evidence for our sphere; methodology and methods; and the relationship between research and practice and policy. It can provide important functions in highlighting the aetiology of personal and social problems, and the impact of policies and practices on communities, families and individuals (Hämäläinen, Littlechild, and Špiláčková, 2014). Whilst this book does not focus on social work research in particular, it is a valuable introduction to field of social science research for social work research. It is important that social work agencies, social workers and university social work departments generate and make use research and its findings to engage with the debates in social work and social policy, and be able to evaluate if approaches are valuable or not in terms of meeting the needs of communities, service users and carers.

Research is important in any discipline in order to develop theory and a knowledge base that can be used to evidence the efficacy (or otherwise) of various interventions, policies, or approaches. This is particularly important for social work, which is sometimes not viewed as a 'proper' academic discipline with robust research underpinning it.

Some of the questions we might raise about social work research are:

- Are we limited to carrying out exploratory research (even though this is valid in many early stages of research activity)?

- Should we look to use ‘harder’ approaches such as experiments, randomised control trials (RCTs) etc.?
- Should we give more credence to quantitative or qualitative research- or should it be a mix of the two? (Hämäläinen, Littlechild, and Špiláčková , 2014).

Such books as this have their part to play in helping social workers and academic staff gain confidence to begin to take such agendas forward.

Martin Davies is Professor Emeritus at the University of East Anglia, UK, with long social science/social work research experience, having held research posts in the UK government’s Home Office, the National Health Service and the Universities of Manchester and East Anglia. Nathan Hughes is Director of Education and Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and Social Work at the Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham, UK. This new edition of their book *Doing a Successful Research Project* is built upon their combined experiences of carrying out research and supervising Masters and PhD students. It is intended as an introduction for undergraduate and postgraduate students who will undertake a research project.

The book leads students concisely and effectively through the research process from initial research question formulation, through to its planning and design, implementation, analysis, write up and dissemination. Its value is not in its detail of the what and how, but in setting out the value of research, the differences between, value of, and the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. It then signposts the reader to the key literature in the area discussed- a valuable way to get to know the most useful literature in that field.

Quantitative research is based on numbers – looking at how the numbers of people who access a service are increasing or decreasing, or as percentages of people of different ethnic groups in the population using social work services, for example- can be very important to know. But it cannot tell us *how* this is happening, and *why* the numbers are as they are. What it can enable us to do is to help us recognise that these are issues we need to examine. We then need to look at qualitative research in order to find out the why and how of what is happening.

Two researchers, Bebbington and Miles (1988), show the need for both qualitative and quantitative research; they found that a child had a 1 in 10 chance of being in public care if s/he was from a single parent family, the parent was on benefits, living in cramped accommodation, the child is of mixed race parentage, and the parent is unemployed. We need to know this, but it does not tell us how or why this happened for these children (and indeed why 9 in 10 of children with these factors did *not* end up in public care), which in social work we need to know in order to deal with these issues; this comes from qualitative research.

It is marketed as practical book, and is good in setting out what beginning researchers need to know of pretty much all the basics, but I do not think you could your project just from using this book- students clearly need much more to really practically do research.

It uses student-friendly language, and therefore can help reduce fears in relation to starting research, including finding a methodology /methods that would be right for the idea. It has useful insights in pointing out the need for the right project management for the research, and how to conduct pilot surveys.

It then gives resumes and checklist- e.g. al list of questions to consider I carrying out surveys.

It has clearly laid-out examples and illustrations, and includes real-life examples of good and bad research practice. It contains discussion of internet-based research methods, research ethics and more, helping provide students with the self-discipline and the confidence to conduct their own research projects, whatever discipline they are from, and also the understanding required to identify the advantages and disadvantages of different strategies.

Some may say it is too basic. I would disagree. It can even be useful if you are a very experienced researcher in one paradigm, but if you need to think again about others.

References

Bebbington, A. and Miles, J. (1989) The Background of Children who enter Local Authority Care, *British Journal of Social Work*, 19 (1): 349-368.

Hämäläinen, H., Littlechild, B., and M Špiláčková , M. (Eds.) (2014) *Social Work Research Across Europe: Methodological Positions and Research Practice*, University of Ostrava European Research Institute for Social Work (ERIS) with Albert Publishers.

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