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Book Review: Researching Society and Culture

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Researching Society and Culture. 2011. Edited by Clive Seale. London: Sage Publications; 636 pages (including index) Paperback (\$25.51). ISBN 978 1849207997.

Reviewed by Maureen Nduku¹

Researching Society and Culture is a three part edited volume comprising of contributions from a variety of authors and edited by Clive Seale. In its third volume (with earlier volumes having published in 2004 and 1998), this book presents “theoretically informed guidance to practicing the key research methods for investigating society and culture” (Seale, 2011:1). The current volume introduces readers to the history of qualitative methods, particularly how to conduct literature reviews, focus group discussions, audio recording of data, archiving and internet research among others. Part one of the book (i.e. Chapters 2 to 10) entitled: ‘*Starting out*’; address topics such as the philosophy of science, research and theory, research and policy, ethics, research questions and proposals and research design. The chapters introduce the reader to the theoretical perspectives underpinning the different research approaches. In discussing the philosophy of science, Epstein notes that scholars who take the view that society can be studied objectively just like the natural sciences are referred to as positivists. The positivist scholars within the social sciences include Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Emile Durkheim, Robert Merton (1910-2003) and Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). Such scholars are considered the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology. Epstein also presents the alternative view which holds that the study of society cannot be equated to the study of nature because the concern with society is not so much about facts but more about the meaning attached to social phenomena. Scholars who hold the view that the study of society is about meaning are referred to as interpretivists and examples include Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), Hans- Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) and Charles Taylor (1931-). In between these two extremes are the reconcilers who hold the view that all science, whether natural or social science is interpretive and there is nothing like pure objectivity. Examples cited here include Max Weber (1864-1920), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820-1893) and their stance is referred to as transcendentalist. On the critical side are postmodern scholars who take a relativist view towards knowledge and science in general. Postmodernists hold the perspective that science is a ‘myth’ among many narratives. Postmodernists have been known to attack both the social and natural sciences and examples here include the Luce Irigaray (1932-), a feminist scholar.

David Silverman, Chapter 3, addresses the issue of research and theory and proceeds to tackle research and policy in Chapter 4. In discussing the need for theory in social research Silverman emphasizes that the theories that researchers are familiar with often influence the type of questions and data that they are likely to collect. Silverman notes that the language of qualitative research if framed in terms of ‘how’ (process) and ‘what’ (facts). The author proceeds to explicate two models of qualitative research that is naturalism and ethnomethodology and constructionism. Silverman notes that researchers who use naturalism in qualitative inquiry are concerned about issues such as facts of the phenomenon of study. Scholars who use ethnomethodology are concerned about how people view their own world and the meanings they

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make of their reality. In the constructionist approach, Silverman underscores that, reality is socially constructed. Researchers who use the constructionist approach frame their questions in terms of 'what' and 'how'. The author (Silverman) critiques each of the qualitative approaches. Chapter 4 is about research and policy, and Silverman emphasizes the need for researchers to distinguish research from social problems that are often the subject of political debate. While noting that theoretical perspectives can provide policy makers with new ways of understanding social problems, the analyst (Silverman) cautions researchers against conducting research defined by policy makers, practitioners and managers because such projects are underlain by political bias. In the same chapter the author notes, "To be truthful, however, we should also recognize how social scientists often need to accept tacitly such definitions in order to attract research grants" (Silverman, 2011p48). Given the earlier caution, this sounds like a contradiction. According to Silverman (2011), choosing to explore social problems from a perspective different from that of policy makers is likely to reveal exactly what the issues are, how things got to be where they are and how change can be brought about. In conducting policy research investigators are required to be sensitive to the historical, political and contextual issues.

Chapters 5 to 9 deal with the practical issues of conducting research. Ali and Kelly in Chapter 5 deal with the question of research ethics. The authors observe that ethics in research is more than following the research procedures and includes the notion of reflexivity which is "the ability to reflect and learn from experience and to use that learning during the research process" (Ali and Kelly, p 59). The authors provide the theoretical context of research ethics and proceed to explicate what ethical research in practice would entail. Conducting ethical research requires that study participants provide their informed consent to participate and are guaranteed of confidentiality of the information that they provide. The authors (Ali & Kelly) also address questions of privacy and confidentiality of the data. Alia and Kelly advise allocating code numbers to study participants, keeping the data in locked filing cabinets or secure electronic files and eventually destroying the data when it is no longer needed. Ali and Kelly note that there are instances when ensuring confidentiality might be difficult and these include where the study population is small and when collecting data through group discussions. For practicing researchers, the question then would be how to deal with the issue of confidentiality in such contexts and the authors are silent about this. What Ali and Kelly note is that internet research using tools such as Facebook, twitter and blogs has brought about complexity in terms of applying informed consent and confidentiality, given that such information is publicly available.

Section two of the book (i.e. Chapter 11 to Chapter 26) entitled: *'Doing research'* introduces with actual techniques and tools, data collection and analysis. The different authors link the data analysis techniques to the different types of data. In Chapter 11 Phellas, Bloch, and Seale discuss structured methods of collecting data such as interviews, questionnaires and observation. The authors distinguish between interviews and questionnaires. While the questionnaire is highly structured, the interview is flexible and able to generate enormous information. Key concepts to consider in designing interviews are standardizing which refers to designing the questions so that all participants respond to similar issues. Another concept is scheduling, that is, ensuring that the questions are asked in the same order. Although useful, the authors do not adequately address why standardizing and scheduling is critical in interviews. In terms of the interviews, the authors discuss face-to-face interviews, telephonic interviews and postal surveys. The authors do however caution that the response rates of postal surveys are often much lower than face-to-interviews. Included in the same chapter are internet-based methods of data collection and these are listed as email and web-based surveys. The authors, correctly, note

that email surveys are both economical, fast and that location is not a barrier although when targeting a wide audience the questions might need to be translated into other languages. The downside of email surveys is that the targeted individuals might respond more than once and also forward to others not included in the sample. While web-based surveys are fast and can have skip questions unlike email surveys, the authors note that not all people have access to computers and the internet thus the findings are often not reflective of the general population. As a result, the findings of web-based surveys are often not generalizable to the whole population. What is useful in this chapter is that the authors provide guidelines on how to design questionnaires, how to ask short and precise questions and also provide examples of questionnaire layout. Also included are guidelines for practical information such as the introduction message, elements of the cover letter, and how the questions in questionnaires should be ordered. Chapters 18 to 20 discuss statistical data analysis while chapters 21 to 26 discuss qualitative data analysis.

Carol Rivas in discussing coding and analyzing qualitative data in Chapter 21 notes that the motivation for writing the chapter was “to help qualitative researchers legitimize their methods, responding to critics who claimed that qualitative research is a softer option than quantitative research. By following the process and then describing it in their reports, researchers can enhance the validity and reliability of their findings” (Rivas, p367). Despite decades of the existence of qualitative research and analysis, scholars trained in the positivist tradition still tend to question the validity and reliability of qualitative studies and so Rivas’ motivation for the chapter remains relevant. The question of validity and reliability is taken up in part 3, Chapter 20 by Clive Seale. Seale tackles the question of validity by addressing it firstly from the scientific tradition and then from the interpretivist tradition.

In discussing validity in the scientific tradition Seale tackles three types of validity which are measurement validity, internal validity and external validity. The author (Seale) notes it is possible for a study to be reliable without necessarily being valid. Reliability is about consistency whereas validity is about the truth-value of a study. Within the scientific tradition there are specific tests that can be carried out to establish the different forms of reliability (inter-rater and inter-coder). In the interpretivist tradition, Seale notes that it is possible to apply the notions of internal and external validity as well as reliability to qualitative research, though some modifications are required. However where the research is based on social constructivism, issues of validity and reliability become difficult to gauge. Seale postulates that it is more useful to speak about credibility rather than validity in interpretive research. The author notes: “through prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation and triangulation exercises, as well as exposure of the research to criticism by other researchers and a search for negative instances that challenge emerging hypotheses and demand their reformulation, credibility is built up” (Seale, 2011 p535). Validation in qualitative research can also be achieved through triangulation. The four types of triangulation are data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation, which is the most commonly used.

The final section of the book entitled: *‘Writing, Presenting, and Reflecting’* concludes the text by discussing the utility of mixed methods. In this chapter, combining qualitative and quantitative methods is regarded as increasingly important in social and humanities research. The author argues that the best way of ensuring credibility of the data is by conducting member validation which entails showing the data and report to the participants from whom it was collected so that they too can comment and indicate whether they agree or disagree with the findings. Reliability or consistency in qualitative research is replaced by the notion of dependability which can be established through what Seale refers to as auditing. The ‘audit trail’

(Seal 2011, p537) entails documenting the whole research process from the start, through data collection to the end and this is critical in establishing conformability, a term used in qualitative research instead of objectivity or neutrality (which are quantitative terms). Part of the audit trail in qualitative research entails being self-critical, a process referred to as reflexivity. While qualitative researchers have been known to reject the realist claims of quantitative researchers, the qualitative researchers have also been critiqued for claiming to represent multiple realities, a notion associated with social constructivists. Seale suggests that the notion of subtle-realism, which recognizing that a real world exists also acknowledges that it is difficult and almost impossible to know such a world with certainty. Thus the plausibility of qualitative findings can be gauged on what is known about the topic and should there be contradictions then the researchers needs to provide sufficient evidence to support their findings. The interpretivist perspectives on validity and reliability are in Seale's view modifications as they do not break entirely from the positivist perspective. The chapter on validity and reliability ends with a section on radical conceptions such as relativism and social constructionism, post-positivism, postmodernism and authenticity. The author identifies four types of authenticity in qualitative research. The radical conceptions of validity and reliability represent a radical break with the positivist perspectives and also do not fit neatly with subtle-realist views.

Researching Society and Culture is a useful text for researchers and students interested in understanding the different theoretical perspectives underpinning social research. The book uses accessible language and the technical terminology is defined and explained in the text. Although the book does not directly deal with feminist research methods, it is a useful guide for researchers and students in the social sciences and humanities. The volume is huge with numerous examples and illustrations that help the authors explain key points. The critiques about the text relate to the organization as well as some of the content. In terms of organization, Chapter 10 entitled: "Doing a Dissertation" in Part 1 might have fitted better in part three which is about writing and presenting research reports. Most examples are drawn from the European context, which is understandable given that the authors are drawing these from their own research. Yet, given that most consumers of such a text are likely to be based in the South, more should have been done (Seale, *Researching Society and Culture*, 3rd edition, 2011) to include research perspectives and examples from the South.

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