

Book review

Basic research methods: an entry to social science research

Gerard Guthrie, Sage, 2010. 221pp.

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Sage Publications has been a notable contributor to the 'discipline of research methodology'. In the last two decades, it has published several volumes and compendiums on methods and theoretical perspectives in research. The most recent addition to this ever-growing list, penned by Gerard Guthrie, Managing Director of Canberra's Guthrie Development Consultancy, is being reviewed here.

Divided into four sections, with each section further divided into chapters, the book is primarily meant for students of social sciences, who are planning their first piece of research. In fact, social anthropology and sociology were the first disciplines that regarded the study of research methodology cardinal to their work. These subjects prepared their students rigorously in research methods and theories before other social science disciplines and humanities turned their attention to their respective students. Therefore, today, whenever a book on research methodology is planned, it is imperative that the author keeps in mind the types of researches that are being carried out in other cognate and applied subjects. Instead of addressing students of a particular subject, the book under review transcends disciplinary boundaries. Each discipline has its own theoretical and practical viewpoints, which are conditioned by its intellectual age. But, what cuts across different disciplines is the issue of 'how the data on which one bases one's conclusions are collected and

analysed'. Methods, techniques, and tools of data collection and analysis are largely a-theoretical.

Guthrie's book is immensely readable. Concepts have been explained in simple terms, and wherever the issues are polemical, it has been pointed out. Right in the beginning, the book states that the data the researchers collect are in the form of both 'numbers' and 'words'. Neither of these is superior to the other. Gone are the days when the epithet of 'science' was applied to quantitative research, whilst qualitative research was termed 'anecdotal', 'non-scientific', and 'story telling'. A competent researcher today is one who knows how to handle both numbers and words. Quantitative and qualitative aspects of research are different, but are complementary ways of representing the universe of study. For instance, we can count the number of times a particular instance of behaviour occurs; and we can also describe it in words. All through, the book integrates words and numbers, and therefore, it will be useful to all researchers, irrespective of whether they specialize in computing numbers or in interpreting words.

The approach Guthrie adopts in this work is one of philosophical pragmatism. The point is that no research should become abstract and removed from the actual, empirical life. Pragmatism examines the value of research methodologies 'from the perspective of their usefulness in engaging with the real world'. One is reminded here of Émile Durkheim's

approach, broken down into four steps: define the phenomenon under study; rebut its non-sociological explanation; espouse a sociological explanation; and delineate steps to bring about a change in the phenomenon or improve upon it.

Elements of this approach are detected in this book.

Guthrie proposes what he calls the 'PAPA model', which conceptualizes four types of research. The first is *pure* research, where the emphasis is on expanding knowledge. Issues of practical concern do not drive such research. A work on the history of brackets or why people revere totems are examples of pure research. *Applied* research is where the topics chosen for investigation are those that have potential for practical application. In the third type, called *policy* research, the focus is on a study of the policies that the state or some other administrative unit has created to determine their effectiveness. The fourth and last type is *action* research, which begins with an issue of practical concern. A study on how to improve the performance of students or how to reduce crime rate or how to increase the participation of people in banking institutions are instances of action research. These four types are placed on a continuum. As one moves from 'pure' to 'action' research, the aspects of practical concern increase. However, whatever the emphasis, the process of research has to follow necessary steps diligently and carry out its work objectively.

The book articulates the various stages of research—commencing with the identification of the problem (or research question); selection of the tools, techniques, and methods of data collection; the modes of analyses, which will depend upon the kind of data that has been collected, and reaching a battery of conclusions; and concluding with writing up the information in the form of a report, disseminating the information, and—if the project stipulates—putting the results into action. Each study raises at the point of its conclusion some more questions. It is expected from the researchers that in their concluding note they would list these, and may pursue their investigation in future.

As described above, the research process appears linear, and then, cyclical. The research findings are written up in a linear manner from start to finish. New questions that emerge from a research study are studied in the same fashion as the first question was investigated. Hence, the cycle is repeated. Guthrie, however, tells us that the research process is iterative. It does not proceed the way in which its results are detailed out. The researcher moves backward and forward through all the stages. For instance, the previous stages are revisited and methods are modified. As plans about the methods of analysis change, these have implications on data collection procedures. Moreover, one cannot ignore the serendipitous discoveries, which may require a recasting of the earlier objectives of research. What one needs to keep in mind is that research is not a mechanical process. The investigator's ideas mature over time as research advances, and these govern the iterations.

This book differs from many others in one more respect. Generally, the chapter (or discussion) on ethical issues in books on research methods appears towards the end. In this book, it constitutes the second chapter, which stresses the cardinality of ethical issues in research. Each researcher must be aware of the relevant ethical dimensions. It is mandatory that the codes of ethics that exist in a discipline be read before embarking on a research investigation.

All the chapters in the book are well illustrated. The boxes in each chapter carry excerpts from research studies. The book mentions all the four methods social scientists use for data collection: fieldwork, survey, available documents, and experimentation. Measurement of variables, tests to determine the validity of a given relationship, and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data are taken up in separate chapters. Of tremendous worth are the tips given on report writing.

That writing is central to the research process can be gauged from Guthrie's statement: '...the quality of your research will be judged by the final written report.' The building blocks of a report are words, sentences, and paragraphs. Four

essential properties of words are: they should be short, accurate, unambiguous, and necessary. In sentences, active voice should be used. One should avoid footnotes, except for citation. On the topic of paragraphs, the book states that there should be one main idea included in each paragraph. Every paragraph should be short, with the first sentence being the most important one, and the next important sentence making up the last one. The middle sentences are all meant to expand upon the main idea.

The moot point is that a writer must keep in mind the reader, who might belong to a different cultural background, located in a different part of the world, and might be an expert, interested scholar or a novice. The success of a piece of writing lies in its ability to communicate with the

reader. One acquires these skills gradually. In the process, one also develops one's style.

The results of research can be communicated in the form of short newspaper articles or as papers in scholarly journals. The style of writing and the technical terms used will vary. Guthrie writes: 'Reports for busy managers should be short. Tell the story in the first four paragraphs.' A report will have the power to convince others only when it succeeds in convincing the writer first.

In conclusion, it can be stated that this book will be of immense use not only to beginners, for whom it is primarily written, but also to specialists in research methods.