

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Patrick White, *Developing Research Questions: A Guide for Social Scientists*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 132 pp. \$US 28.95 paper (978-1-4039-9815-6)

This book offers a concise and practical engagement of how one develops research questions, and more importantly, how those questions are related to ideas, theories, hypotheses, methods, results and conclusions. It deconstructs the research process to highlight how questions influence the steps involved in planning and carrying out social science research projects.

White begins by introducing readers to the importance of thinking about research questions and encourages them to appreciate how front-end time and effort used to develop strong research questions facilitates better research and saves much back-end energy and resources analyzing data and later disseminating results to interested audiences. The focus on questions is innovative because it fills a gap left open by many methods texts that focus on specific techniques or research design and often assume the difficult work of funneling interests into researchable questions has already been done.

Curiosity and surprise are highlighted as the basis of inquiry. White argues that it is vital to be interested in the topics one researches. Yet, he also stresses the importance of avoiding pre-determining conclusions and advocates that researchers be open to the possibility of surprise. He encourages designing questions that are impartial and that have the potential to generate answers that are unexpected. On this front he offers a number of insights into how current affairs, theory, and policy can be used to generate research questions and advice on how one can use them to avoid falling into the pitfalls of previous research.

Although White emphasizes the importance of curiosity and surprise, he also stresses the need to consider the researchability of questions. In exploring this, he identifies a number of problems related to the way questions are structured; for example, differentiating between questions and statements, avoiding the fallacy of asking many questions but treating them as one, avoiding problems related to false dichotomies, and avoiding tautological questions. He warns that some questions, for instance those that are metaphysical or normative, cannot be answered with social science methods because they cannot be adequately

examined with empirical evidence. In assessing these issues White offers many practical examples to illustrate problems and offers different typologies for understanding questions to help parse out the kinds of answers they evoke.

Practical constraints related to the feasibility of research questions are assessed in much detail. This is explored by considering the need to prioritize among research questions. White considers how population of interest and geographic location of coverage bound what sample and data can be obtained to answer questions and the conclusions that result. He highlights the need to consider the historical context in which questions are posed and how this influences interpretation and comparison of data. Time and resources to carry out research is also dealt with by looking at how funding or financial resources affect the ability to answer questions. White reminds readers to consider the cost of travel, subsistence during fieldwork, equipment and software needed to gather and process data, as well as hidden costs that might be related to analyzing and disseminating data and findings.

The relationship between research questions and methods is also addressed in detail. White argues that well crafted questions influence the research design and methods available to answer them. He advocates thinking about questions first and methods later. His approach to research design is thus broad. Using the example of social class he introduces the relationship among questions, previous research, scholarly traditions, operationalization, and data. He uses a number of published studies to illustrate strengths and weaknesses of questions derived from popular, but taken for granted, theoretical concepts like human, cultural or social capital. He cautions that it is important to use questions that are essential to one's research rather than being tempted to follow fleeting scholarly fashions.

White concludes the book by discussing how to answer research questions. In doing so, he assesses the structure of arguments and advocates the need to consider how claims are linked to evidence through "warrants." Thinking about the logic used to tie conclusions to data helps sharpen the clarity and precision of arguments, he believes. He warns readers to avoid overstating their claims and instead advocates thinking about qualifications and alternate arguments. It is a fitting end to a book devoted to research questions.

Developing Research Questions is a good supplement to undergraduate research methods or design texts. However, North American readers should be warned that the book's primary audience appears to be British. This is seen in the language and examples used to illustrate arguments and may be a concern for those who wish to use it at the undergraduate

level. Nevertheless, this does not detract from White's central focus on the importance of crafting strong research questions, which is an essential part of the research process that is often taken for granted or even overlooked.

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