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This new edition of *Researching Society and Culture* (2004) provides a multi-method overview and methodological contextualization of research for students of sociology and other disciplines. The collection contains 34 commissioned chapters subdivided into an introduction, research contexts (10 chapters), doing research (20 chapters), and case studies (three chapters); the collection closes with a section of workshop and discussion exercises. Although most chapters are written as individual single contributions, some authors (the editor Clive Seale with eight chapters, in particular) are represented more than once in areas, e.g. coding and analyzing data, secondary analysis, where one might have expected an alternative author. Notwithstanding, the range of issues dealt with and the methodological and representational contextualization of research methods in social research is thorough. I believe the text offers a good selection of readings if one’s aim is to expose novices to the range of techniques and theories of potential relevance to research without precipitously foreclosing on possibilities students may want to consider.

In addition to changes to chapter content from the 1998 edition, the new edition integrates follow-up readings from Seale (2004), revises activities for students, and provides links with follow up web sources on relevant issues (http://www.rscbook.co.uk/). The text adopts the same pedagogic approach as other Sage texts, such as Silverman and Seale (2005), of commissioned chapters, discussion questions and tasks for the student.

In his introduction Seale claims the text avoids the pitfalls of toolbox methods book approaches by addressing both methodology and method and also interlinking this discussion with philosophy, theory and practice in the social sciences. Reflexivity is addressed in the attention to writing practices and representation specifically in the final three chapters of case studies. The catholic inclusion of quantitative and qualitative methods is clearly intended to reflect the critical realist stance Seale (1999) has elsewhere promoted as a pragmatic epistemology for social research. This stance and the recent pragmatist rationale for mixed methods in sociology and allied disciplines is currently in vogue and attempts to strike a middle road between formerly antagonistic paradigm wars (Creswell, 2003; Daly et al., 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).
Reviewers of the previous edition (1998), while acknowledging the general strength of the collection, expressed reservations that may still be apparent. Ali (2001), while charitable about the potential of the volume, also acknowledges that the earlier text tends to be used by students to focus on methods out of context. Hill (1998) argues that each of the 34 chapters on their own ‘oversimplifies’ issues and could lead students into treating research in a superficial manner. I like to be charitable about the potential of the text to address the concerns and needs of novice researchers rather than interpreting limitations in terms of a narrow reading of the classroom application of the text. Thus, I think Hill underestimates the potential of the text to give novices adequate starting points to contextualize their research options and choices. Such contextualization is distinctly lacking in many methods texts, including some on my shelf. The text provides its own definitions of relevant contexts by including eleven chapters on relevant contexts for research including philosophy of social science, politics and identities, and history.

In the new edition the integration of follow-up readings, a companion reader volume, weblinks and discussion exercises address some of the shortcomings of the earlier edition. Although potentially a stand alone volume, the new edition is clearly intended to be one component of an undergraduate package together with Seale (2004) whose reader is referenced at the end of each chapter; any prospective reader will benefit most by having both volumes at hand. These cross-indexed readings are also complemented by further readings which refer students to other sources. In teaching contexts, it would be critical for students to be directed to follow up on further readings to substantiate methodological and method choices. The weblink additions do provide some potentially useful discussion questions for class exercises but do not, despite fulsome advertising to the contrary, add substantially to the text in ways other book sites do. One might also question some of the particular choices.

Given the catholic audience of novice researchers of society and culture that the text attempts to address, it is perhaps not surprising that discourse analysis per se does not feature extensively in the text. However, readers of Discourse and Society will note in the glossary a basic distinction in the text between a broadly Foucauldian ‘system of knowledge’ approach contrasted with ‘more narrowly’ linguistic definitions, e.g. medical talk. One chapter (27) by Fran Tonkiss addresses content and discourse analysis together – perhaps a strange juxtaposition for discourse analysts, and the following chapter (28) provides a brief overview of conversation analysis.

The value of such a text for readers of this journal is that the collection will provide a good exemplification of what researchers of other methodological persuasions see as relevant in understanding society and culture. It may also suggest to those employing discursive methodological frameworks ways of expanding their research options whether individually or in collaboration with others in attempting to represent the socio-cultural worlds we investigate.

REFERENCES


