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Transforming research methods in the social sciences: Case studies from South Africa



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Engaging with the challenges of social science research methods

Many scholarly books have been written on the application and planning required for adopting appropriate research methodologies that address social complexities. Past examples include debates on the enforced notion of a 'culture of silence' by post-colonial literary theorists and cultural critics^{1,2} as well as practical examples of innovative participatory research in the social sciences³. *Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, with its case studies from South Africa, is a welcome addition in negotiating a more inclusive exploration of research use and practice recognising diverse cultural complexities.

The ambition for the book is to address social challenges by demonstrating how past limitations and tendencies in research methodologies, applied by the social sciences, might be overcome. It is well recognised that, in contemporary social and scientific research that claims responsibility for social transformation, radical shifts in normative approaches and perceptions have introduced an element of unpredictability that impacts on the way we do research. Efforts to capture this transformation in how we generate knowledge was introduced, for example, in the theoretical framework of Mode 2, which acknowledges a Knowledge Society, a Risk Society and an Information Society that all play roles in this endeavour. This opposes Mode 1 that follows a linear (deficit) hierarchical process. It is inevitable that, within this transformed knowledge production landscape, new theories as well as new research methodologies should be adapted to fit new purposes.

In order to rise to this challenge, this book addresses how methods such as psycho-biography, critical discourse, feminism, ethnography, auto-ethnography, photo-voice and action, and community-based research methodologies might be used in ways that open up further discourse as well as provide guidance to future researchers. Most of these methods are not new and have already been applied in, for example, India and Brazil. The value of this book lies in bringing them together in a single publication focused on South Africa.

Although the editors endorse Mode 2 as well as a transdisciplinary approach, the content pays disappointingly little attention to exactly how these approaches will have impact and transgress disciplinary boundaries. Mode 2, for example, is measured through monitoring and evaluating impact of research findings, and the book falls short in demonstrating how real change takes place within communities. Although transdisciplinary approaches are mentioned in the introductory chapter, they seem to comprise no more than a buzzword in the book.

The focus remains on the dichotomies between qualitative and quantitative research, with dips into methodological varieties. One wishes for more references to seminal works on different forms of social science theories and related research methodologies but, on the other hand, the exploratory nature of the book remains useful and interesting. Moreover, the book might have been more innovative by exploring the relation between theory and practice, the current impact of socio-technical systems, the easily communicated seductive use of the creative arts and visual literacy by means of documentary films and ethno-literary approaches.

Social scientists, out of sheer necessity, use methods beyond their disciplinary training. But theories applicable to the North are seldom a 'fit to size' for scholars from the South. However, the shift into 'unmarked' territory during the process of fieldwork often provides unexpected space for creativity. Although doing so is daunting, and often with limited theoretical support or guidance, scholars in the South have provided unique, appropriate and empowering insights when they venture into research methodologies that embrace the world represented, often simultaneously, by the formally educated and by those strong in indigenous knowledge. With such research best understood as a way of both 'being in the world' and 'doing in the world', this book invites the reader to consider technology that brings about dialogical transformation.

Dialogical transformations affect many traditional structures, ranging from the political to the personal, and in a sense de-monopolise and de-compartmentalise expert knowledge by allowing *all* voices to be heard. There are challenges. The first is to manage creative approaches with research methodologies to address the specific difficulties of researchers in the South. Secondly, a more reflective conceptualisation needs to be embraced. The social sciences, in general, include invention as well as experimentation of methods to suit specific purposes, such as *bricolage*, photo-voice and visual language to generate knowledge and to continuously expand ethical reflection. This requires methods that are ahistorical, interpretive and analytical. By using the methods of the humanities, such as visual communication (film documentaries) and literature (poems and essays), the scope of traditional social science based methodologies is enlarged. This book brings to mind the challenges that current researchers face when employing social science methodologies such as interviews, ethnographies, surveys and statistical data analysis. Few academic programmes provide support or training in these areas. Social scientists also provide examples of how their research methodology might be useful to the humanities, while the latter may have methodological solutions to enrich the understanding of topics in social science fieldwork.

Despite its few shortcomings, this book is a useful guide for social science researchers in that it contextualises their methods within the South African environment. Although there is sadly still a tendency to fall back on local politics of race and culture (absurdly 'apologising' for being white), enough is provided to benefit scholars both locally and internationally. It is useful for exploring the compatibility between different purposes, based in different disciplinary relationships, that brings about different ways of conceiving knowledge, thus providing a possibility to enhance traditional research practices within challenging social structures, especially those practices that maintain an often unsuitable normative order within ever-transforming social structures. This book demonstrates sufficiently that the social sciences construct the social world through scholars who, while being the subjects of such constructions, also conceptualise social order by means of the research methodologies that they apply.

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