BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

L. Bickman & D.J. Rog (Eds.). (2009). *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 659 pages.

Reviewed by Jason T. Burkhardt

The term "Social Science research" represents a panoply of theoretical, methodological, and practical perspectives and cognate areas. Rarely is a text able to succinctly and effectively appeal to a wide variety of practitioners from all areas of social science while maintaining a practical and easily accessible tone. However, this is exactly what I found when I read the second edition of *The Sage Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*, edited by Leonard Bickman and Debra Rog. This book targets two primary audiences: the applied researcher who is looking for a practical reference and the new researcher looking for instruction. As such, the discussions were both rich in content and easy to understand, and Bickman and Rog succeed in their mission to "represent the cutting edge of applied research methods" (p. viii). The references they use are as current as 2009, and represent an encomium of theory, knowledge, and "state of the art" technique across disciplines and cognate areas. Topics covered in the introduction include the difference between basic and applied research, knowledge use versus knowledge construction, validity, and the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. This review is the first feature of the book that makes it accessible.

Bickman and Rog subdivide the book into three parts: Approaches to Applied Research, Applied Research Designs, and Practical Data Collection. The "Approaches" section contains chapters on applied research design, statistical power, practical sampling, and planning ethically responsible research. The "Design" section has chapters on randomly controlled trials (RCT), quasi-experimentation, designing qualitative studies, how to do better case studies, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, organizational diagnosis, and research synthesis and meta-analysis. The "Data Collection" section contains chapters on design and evaluation of survey questions, In-

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ternet survey methods, concept mapping, mail surveys, methods for sampling and interviewing in telephone surveys, ethnographies, and focus group research. Three major themes also run throughout the book: variance and validity, design issues, and specific methodological recommendations.

The first theme concerns the relationships between variance, validity, and the intervention effects that the social researcher is attempting to identify and explain. The book presents this in terms of signal to noise ratio, or ratio of the effect of some intervention to variance and validity threats. It also consistently addresses variance in relation to validity of causal inference, power analysis, and qualitative design. Mark Lipsey and Sean Hurley discuss increasing statistical power both through increasing the precision of measurement (increasing sample size and clearly defining constructs) and through reduction of variance. They recommend such strategies as making appropriate design decisions and recognizing that the real question of research is the validity of the assumptions we make about how the dependent variable changes under treatment. I found that the offered design tradeoffs were easy to understand and cogently presented. Later sections of the text also make the point that design choices and theoretical assumptions are more effective for controlling threats to validity than statistical controls (e.g., Chapter 7). Gary Henry addresses variance in his chapter by presenting a discussion on probability sampling as the best method for reducing variance caused by sampling error. He also presents an effective discussion on the problems that nonprobability sampling creates, along with recommendations on how to deal with these issues. The sampling discussion continues throughout the book in the various methods sessions.

The design issues sections in each of the chapters make the excellent point that quality is an issue of concern from the very conception of the research idea. Many research studies begin after the actual intervention or program of interest is complete or, at best, already in place. This is problematic, because it often forces the researcher or evaluator into making lower quality design choices. It is also problematic when one considers that in today's economy, every dollar spent on research and evaluation is a precious commodity.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 present the design process as the child of the research question. This point is crucial as a means of reinforcing the overall frame of "quality from beginning to end." In their chapter, Floyd Fowler and Carol Cosenza present types of survey questions

that would yield data that are highly susceptible to validity threats, along with examples of well-written and well-designed questions and response item solutions. Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie present the research process through all phases, with recommendations at each phase about how to integrate data collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Robert Yin uses direct methodological advice and strategies to present the material in his chapter. He is also able to delineate clear steps in designing quality case study research, including selection of the most relevant samples, practical issues in data collection, and proper analysis and synthesis of mixed methods data and research methods. His discussion on path analysis makes this complicated concept easy to understand as well. The overall cohesiveness and tone of the design sections make the material easy to absorb and retain; they have technical relevance for the practicing researcher, while not turning away the newcomer with glassy eyes.

Overall, the methods sections of each chapter provide balanced discussions of experimental, quasi-/non-experimental, and qualitative designs. The experimental research section begins with a typical discussion of experiments and lionizes the Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) as the "golden child" of research methods (Chapter 1). As a balance, Mel Mark and Charles Reichardt challenge this position by asserting that many people believe this is due to comparisons of "well-designed random experiments" with "mediocre quasi-experiments" (p. 206).

The discussions of the interrupted time-series and regression discontinuity designs are equally well done. These designs are quite strong in their ability to make valid causal inferences, especially when paired with other methods to reduce validity threats. This is an important point, as the random assignment process necessary for an RCT may not be feasible from an ethical, cost, or administrative perspective. Supporting this idea in the review of the interrupted time-series and regression discontinuity designs was a good choice, as it is an important idea for both new and established researchers to consider.

It can be frustrating when one reads a great argument for tradeoffs or design modification with no follow-up to specific methodological recommendations. This text avoids this, as in the chapter by Harris Cooper, Erika Patall, and James Lindsay, who handle the topic of trade-offs and other "real world application concerns" by making specific recommendations.

The third section of the book presents methods discussions that focus on specific types of research and data collection. It contains a well-done section on telephone interviewing, Internet research, mail surveys, and ethics in research. Also included is an excellent and comprehensive review of ethnographic research by David Fetterman (Chapter 17). These discussions provide the technical blueprints for conducting a wide array of research and leave the reader with a good understanding of the "tools of the trade." Fetterman is especially good at presenting an entire methodology from beginning to end in plain and easily consumable format.

This book has many strong points. One of the best features of the book is the way the various authors address the concept of controlling threats to validity due to variance from the very beginning of the study. The specific methods presented integrate well with each other, are practical and feasible, and form a cohesive whole. Bickman and Rog selected well-known contributing authors who made credible recommendations in light of the relevant literature. I was satisfied with the range of topics covered, and found I was not left wanting for anything.

The only real weakness of this text is that some of the chapters on specific methods tended to become repetitive, and could have been more succinct considering the intended users. More concise wording could have allowed more space for discussion of the complex theoretical topics presented earlier in the book.

In conclusion, I would definitely say that this book is worth purchasing by anyone who engages in or is considering a career in applied social research. The book provides consistent reinforcement of foundational topics, and allows access to the more complex or esoteric points as well. I would have liked to have this book in some beginning courses, and it would even make a great text for the foundation courses of a graduate research or evaluation program.