

Review:

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Dennis Howitt & Duncan Cramer (2005). Introduction to Research Methods in Psychology. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 354 pages, ISBN 0 131 39984-5, £ 27.99.

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Abstract: This introduction to quantitative and qualitative research methods largely succeeds in conveying the main aims of contemporary empirical research in psychology. However, while the scope of the text is admirable, qualitative methods are presented implicitly as an exception to main-stream psychological research. Moreover, useful ways of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches are explored only briefly. Thus even though the text has an adequate description of qualitative methods, students reading HOWITT and CRAMER's work would be left in no doubt about the status of qualitative work in the discipline.

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1. Overview

This is a clear and accessible introductory textbook that would be most useful for psychology students in the third year of their undergraduate degree and those planning a research project. The general aims of the text are fulfilled: namely, to encourage students to reflect on their choice of research methods, on what they hope to achieve with these methods, as well as on relevant practical, ethical and academic research issues (e.g., what reviewers would look for in a potential publication). The text adopts a level-headed and clear style, emphasising good scholarship and carefully thought-through research projects. The framework is one in which hypotheses are tested in experimental approaches using statistics, and this is the type of research work that the text is designed to help one "read" critically. In this respect, the inclusion of *Part 4* on qualitative methods is important because students who review the literature but exclude, broadly dismiss, or briefly describe qualitative research no longer have an adequate excuse. However, despite recent inroads into the quantitative-qualitative divide, the book can best be described as adopting a conservative approach to the potential insights of qualitative research. In other words, the text seems to have been devised for psychology departments in which the majority of research

projects will be quantitative and only some brave souls will swim qualitatively against the stream. [1]

2. Text Aims and Structure

This text itself contains five "self-contained" parts which cover: 1) the basics of research, 2) quantitative research methods, 3) fundamentals of testing and measurement, 4) qualitative research methods, and 5) research for projects, dissertations and theses. Given the previously mentioned emphasis on quantitative research it is not surprising to find that the preface indicates that this book completes a trilogy (the other two books in the series are *Introduction to Statistics in Psychology* and *A Guide to Computing Statistics with SPSS for Windows*). The authors indicate their expertise in psychology when they note that one of these earlier works is "the only statistics text that most of us will need" (HOWITT & CRAMER, 2005, p.xv). But is this the only research text most psychologists would ever need and would the qualitative material on its own "... effectively support any qualitative research done by modern students" (p.xiv)? [2]

In short, my answer is "only just". Although the text is very good on traditional topics, it doesn't find a way to integrate qualitative methods. Given the slow but encouraging pace at which psychology is taking up qualitative research, it is my hope that most psychologists will need something more than this—and sooner rather than later. As already noted, the first three sections are solid, engaging and helpful summaries of research as it is conducted in most mainstream psychology departments. Hypotheses, generalisations, causal explanations, longitudinal studies and randomised assignment are carefully discussed in chapter 1. However, it is disappointing that more is not written here about the role of theory and its relation to the examination of ideas and empirical research practice. This should be included in chapter 2 where aims and hypotheses in research are examined, but instead the main emphasis is on meta-analytic studies, evaluation or outcome studies, and descriptive or exploratory studies. Presumably, qualitative research is mostly descriptive or exploratory, but readers who need information about theoretical frameworks (e.g., realism, positivism and constructionism), will find that theoretical issues are not examined until the qualitative chapter. Presumably this is because the present state of psychology no longer needs to articulate or examine its assumptions, whereas qualitative research is a product of sustained metatheoretical critique. [3]

Chapter 3 examines the problems of generalising from a sample or samples. Statistical significance is introduced along with some useful material on the correct verbal labels for correlation size. Not surprisingly, there is no mention of whether the same issues apply to readings of qualitative research. With regard to this point, Chapter 4 *Research reports: The total picture* acknowledges at the beginning that "some of the objections to the standard approach are discussed in the chapters on qualitative methods (Chapters 15-21)" (p.53). While this approach is helpful for writing up a quantitative research project, the lack of attention to qualitative projects at this point reiterates the problem that is repeated every time qualitative research is presented to psychologists who cannot "read" it

(except through the lens of operationalisation, measurement, objectivity, etc.). If the authors had included the requirements for qualitative and quantitative student research, they would have helped considerably those psychologists who might want to see how qualitative methods work in research practice. It would be beneficial if the authors had addressed such issues as whether to have a results and a discussion section in a qualitative report or, for example, to focus more, on reporting themes and exemplars. [4]

The remaining chapters in *Part 1: The basics of research* cover literature searches and research ethics. Chapter 5 focuses on the use of electronic databases, and contains useful information about judging a publication's reputation as well as the standard of its journal. Images of databases may help some students who are unfamiliar with them, and comments may guide others as to the difficult issue of evaluating which papers to include in a review. However, simple topics like choosing key words and searching the references of recent articles are not mentioned. Similarly, search strategies that can include general search engines such as Google are not included, despite the fact that they can be a good source of links or publications. This advice extends, moreover, to researchers who are not so concerned about maintaining strict boundaries between complementary disciplines. With regard to Chapter 6 on ethics, the advice is good but again information relevant to qualitative research is not included. As in other chapters, text boxes are used effectively to highlight additional points. Activities at the end of each chapter could be successfully incorporated into tutorials as well as assisting students to revise the material. [5]

Part 2 focuses on quantitative research methods and is a thorough treatment of experimental conditions and manipulations, statistical significance, advanced experimental design, factorial designs, experimenter effects and demand characteristics. Chapter 9 examines cross-sectional or correlational research. Chapter 10 introduces longitudinal studies with retrospective and prospective designs, explores third variable problems (e.g., mediation, moderation, and suppression), and provides an analysis of non-experimental designs and path analysis. Chapter 11 covers sampling and population surveys, offering useful advice, but again without anything specifically for a qualitative researcher. [6]

Part 3 continues the extensive treatment of typical psychological research methods topics. For example, Chapter 12 examines the scales and scale construction, writing items for questionnaires, item analysis, improving item consistency, and the possible use of factor analysis. Reliability and validity are described in detail in Chapter 13—with a focus on the value of tests and measures—and the rather brief Chapter 14 explores the categorisation of data. Specifically, the authors argue that "more than any other part of this book, coding brings together quantitative and qualitative research" (p.232). The crucial difference between the approaches, of course, is whether there is pre-coding, and the extent to which such an imposition defeats the purpose of qualitative data collection methods. Content analysis is mentioned as a quantitative approach to qualitative materials without any description of criticisms or problems with the approach. Types of coding are described in some detail with pre-coding largely

amounting to limiting the variability of respondents' questions to specific questionnaire topics. As HOWITT and CRAMER rightly note, "pre-coding means that nuances and subtleties are filtered out" (p.236). Although sources of pre-coded categories are mentioned, combined sequential analyses are overlooked. That is, focus groups are mentioned as a data source, but there is little indication of how to do these well, how many groups might be required, and whether this could possibly form a publication on its own, rather than functioning as the means to create categories for a questionnaire or structured interview. It is here that theory—in contrast to aims and derived hypotheses—is finally mentioned, but this is only in relation to researcher-imposed coding (i.e., codes may be developed due to the "researcher's interest in a theory which strongly suggests a system of analysis" (p.237). Again it is clear that the major focus is quantitative as the authors finish the chapter with various strategies for quantifying and dealing with disagreements between coders. Accordingly, the presentation of conceptual and practical features of reliability and validity contradict the claim that coding brings the two broad types of methods together, because the presentation is almost exclusively from a quantitative perspective. [7]

Given the previous criticisms of the structure of this text, an extended evaluation of the presentation of qualitative methods (Part 4) is provided in the next section of this review. This allows me to address some final points about Part 5/Chapter 22 in which students are encouraged to think about developing ideas for research. Given the methodological and statistical focus of the book, it is not surprising to find ideas and theories coming towards the end of the book. This is not necessarily bad, as it would be difficult to create research projects with students at various levels if they were required to develop their project with the theory first and then the research topic and method. However, an alternative structure to the text might have been to work with examples of several interesting research projects and to explore the ways in which students worked with a supervisor to develop a feasible quantitative or qualitative project (or a feasible combination for a PhD). This would be a suitable alternative to a theory-first or method-first approach. As with the previous chapters, there is some good advice here for students such as evaluating the academic value of a piece of research (e.g., would pre- and post-outcome data for a treatment group with no control be of academic interest?), assessing the practicality of a project (e.g., qualitative interviews with mentally ill offenders would raise a host of issues for any potential student project), and motivation (e.g., especially where a personal interest or experience could be a strength *and* a weakness when interviewing individuals about a particular issue). It is surprising also that HOWITT and CRAMER need to deal with the problems of proposing a straight replication study, although their advice here is useful in teasing out the contribution that a project could make to the literature (i.e., what new features the research will explore and can these be justified theoretically). Unfortunately, it is also possible that students could be overwhelmed by the list of research-generating-ideas and just do what their supervisor says! References to material about developing research proposals for qualitative and quantitative research would have been useful here. [8]

3. How Good Is The Qualitative Research Methods Section?

As already noted, this text reflects rather than challenges (in an inclusive manner) the methodological status quo in psychology. It is stated, for example, that "one can study psychology for years, and rarely if ever come across qualitative research and theory" (p.246). In this introduction to qualitative methods, the authors note that "less quantifiable subject matter" (p.247) has been squeezed out but do so in a manner which reiterates the importance of the history of quantitative methods. The description of qualitative research also reiterates the sequential model from qualitative to quantitative analysis, again using intelligence as the example, and mentions "richness of data" in somewhat ambiguous terms. For example, HOWITT and CRAMER note: "Of course, the phrase 'richness of data' might be regarded as a euphemism for unfocused, unstructured, unsystematic, anecdotal twaddle by the critical quantitative researcher" (p.248). The fact that such comments often are not made by qualitative researchers about the hegemony of quantitative research and its philosophical basis indicates the kind of subtleties about power and language that are ignored in mainstream psychology. HOWITT and CRAMER provide a more sympathetic account when they emphasise the humanistic side of qualitative research and reiterate that "all researchers should have some appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach" (p.249). However, they fail to mention the Foucauldian critique of humanism in which simplistic notions of "giving voice" to marginalised people, for example, fail to adequately interrogate issues of power and social control (see SULLIVAN, 2005 for an example of relevant issues with regard to forensic patients and risk). Moreover, the recommendation to use qualitative methods is tentative and reflects a view that qualitative work is used mainly for exploratory research, and only when there are no clear quantitative alternatives. In addition, the summary mentions the type of point increasingly made by philosophical realists about positions such as social constructionism which can be linked to conventionalism: namely, that "qualitative researchers often overlook their allegiance to positivism" (p.256). [9]

Features of qualitative data collection are described in chapter 16, with the focus on the methods of participant observation, focus groups and interviews. The first method is described without providing a specific example of participant observation or, for that matter, its integration into an action research approach. Focus groups, the second method, are described with some very good advice, but the account given overestimates the time involved, does not suggest using a second researcher to keep track of participants, and again no published exemplar is provided. The third method is described and structured interviews are compared with qualitative interviews. The presentation is again mixed: helpful comments (e.g., about preparation of the interview guide) are interspersed with unreferenced criticisms such as: "According to some, rambling accounts are to be encouraged in qualitative interviewing as this pushes the data far wider than the researcher may have anticipated" (p.265). An example of a good semi-structured interview would have been helpful in the text box format that is used elsewhere. The authors have mentioned recording only with standard tape recorders, overlooking newer technologies such as recording digital files directly onto a

laptop, a method which allows also for accurate timing of pauses for discourse analysis. Finally, there is no reference to the issue of reflexivity (e.g., see SULLIVAN, 2002)—either in the broad theoretical sense—or as an issue of great importance in the practice of the interview. [10]

Chapter 17 focuses on transcription and, specifically, use of the JEFFERSON system. One difficulty with the system is mentioned: "Anyone carrying out Jefferson transcription will experience a degree of uncertainty as to whether they have achieved an appropriate level of transcription detail" (p.273). Given the example is naturally occurring, some reference to conversation analysis would have been appropriate here. Instead, chapter 19 examines discourse analysis and chapter 20 describes conversation analysis. There is also no indication as to whether in-depth interview data could be presented in this manner. For example, could only excerpts for the final publication be given the full JEFFERSON system treatment? The authors move straight onto data analysis and emphasise grounded theory and an inductive approach to generalisation and theory construction (cf. HAIG's [1995] work on abduction and grounded theory which encourages a different perspective). There is useful material here for researchers to develop theory that is based on an intimate knowledge of rich data, although some consideration of the emergence of themes (e.g., from data based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, SMITH, 2003) would have been a welcome addition. Chapter 21 ends with several criticisms of grounded theory and speculates about whether "grounded theory is really a sort of Trojan horse which has been cunningly brought into psychology, but is really the enemy of advancement in psychology" (p.287). The basis for this claim is a remark by STRAUSS and CORBIN (1999) which take as indicating that grounded theory analysis "is much more about the social (interactive) than the psychological" (p.287). Clearly, there is little room for psychological phenomena to be explored as social and relational within HOWITT and CRAMER's view of qualitative and quantitative research. [11]

The final chapter examines criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. As with the previous chapters, there is useful information here although students may seem somewhat overwhelmed by the lack of succinct guidance. For example, triangulation is introduced but no convincing description is given of how it can work within a qualitative project. For example, policy documents may contradict claims made by participants such as doctors and patients. Recent articles on the issue of quality might have provided useful additional references for students in the section titled "Criteria for novices". Articles such as MAYS and POPE (2000) would reinforce their points and demonstrate to psychologists that qualitative work is often multidisciplinary. [12]

4. Summary

This is a balanced and interesting text if your default position is that you work within a psychology department which strongly favours quantitative research. From this perspective, the text contains material that will help trainee psychology researchers to read (and therefore understand and possibly even include) qualitative research in their work. However, psychology's reluctance to engage seriously with meaning and experience is also on show in this text. That is, while it attempts to introduce students to qualitative research theories and methods, it is clear that tolerance for qualitative methods does not entail equality and integration. Accordingly, I would recommend the text for research methods classes which might include a lecture on two on qualitative methods, but in which it would also be clear that only thoughtful, dedicated and adventurous students would pursue a predominantly qualitative project. [13]

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Gavin SULLIVAN is a lecturer with interests in philosophy and psychology. He has written about reflexivity as a metatheoretical issue for psychology, WITTGENSTEIN's influence on psychotherapy practice, reflexivity and subjectivity in qualitative research, language change and notions of self in psychotherapy, risk theory in relation to qualitative research with forensic patients, the problems of contemporary anxiety self-help program and their governance, the challenges for emotion theory of vacillating and mixed emotions, the difficulties of cognitive appraisal theories in relation to social and relational emotions, conceptual issues in the study of pride as a self-evaluative emotion, and the need to rethink current understandings of national pride and patriotism. He is currently completing a book on the significance of pride for self and culture as well as a monograph on the relevance and limits of WITTGENSTEIN 's philosophy for psychology. This review was completed while the author was a visiting research fellow at the Free University, Berlin with the generous support of an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellowship.

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