

HANDBOOK FOR LECTURERS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Book Review

Breakwell, G (ed) (2004) **Doing social psychology research**. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. ISBN 1 4051 0812 6 pbk. Pages 379.

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Research in social psychology provides a means of systematically gaining an understanding of human behaviour. Studying and mastering different tools of discovery can be an exciting journey that encourages students of research to ask and begin to answer difficult but fundamentally important questions about social reality. However, such questions are invariably complex and require a focused and refined question which is addressed using a suitable methodology. The challenge remains for social psychology researchers to develop the skill of choosing from an array of available research methods and applying the most appropriate to the question at hand. To augment this skill, it is necessary to gain a thorough understanding of the existing multiplicity of methods.

Doing social psychology research is a resource which is aimed at undergraduates who would like to learn about some of the data collection methods and data analysis approaches that are used in social psychology. The book is not comprehensive in its coverage of available methods; neither is it set to the tone of any particular epistemological or methodological orientation. Instead, it covers a selection of social psychology research methods and offers students a diverse array of applications.

This book comprises 14 individually-authored chapters. The first two are introductory overviews of the logic of experimental research in general, while chapters 3 to 14 each describe a particular research method and illustrate, through the use of an exercise, how it can be applied to a particular research question drawn from social psychology. Each chapter can be used as a distinct and independent basis for learning about both the method and the social psychological problem to which it is applied. Chapter 3 illustrates how the concept of optimistic bias requires a careful analysis of the chosen data-recording technique and the implications of adopting that particular approach. Chapters 4 through 6 discuss quasi-experimental research, the first with a focus on checklist questionnaires and the latter honing in more specifically on challenges in the

field setting. Chapter 6 also introduces the basic principles of designing a self-report questionnaire, while chapters 7 and 8 each address the use of self-report to measure attitudes and identity motives respectively. Chapters 12 and 13 provide guidance on the analysis of self report describing the Multiple Sorting Procedure and the Laddering Technique. Chapter 9 introduces the use of discourse analysis on archival sources and Chapter 10 describes interpretative phenomenological analysis and details the conducting of a non-experimental research design from construction of the interview schedule, to recording and reporting of data. Chapter 11 presents the technique of cognitive mapping and guides the reader through analysis of self-report data and theory generation. Finally, chapter 14 introduces the principles and describes the practicalities of running a focus group.

The chapters are of variable quality and there is variety in the approaches taken to presenting the material. For example, chapters 10 to 14 first describe the research method and its assumptions and then present an exercise with which the reader can apply the method and gain experience in its use. Other chapters, for example, 4, 7 and 9, use an example or exercise from the outset to illustrate the use of the method at hand. Each chapter has a section entitled “notes to the course leader” which pitches the level of the chapter and its exercise and provides the teacher with hints and recommendations on how to use the chapter with a class. Two personal favourite inserts can be found in Chapter 2: *Experimental research designs* which provides a useful table of questions to be asked of research designs in psychology; Chapter 10: *Interpretive phenomenological analysis* which uses as its exercise a particularly well laid out experiment with tips and boxes as examples of how to either achieve a certain end or be most successful in the process of conducting that particular section of the study.

It is recommended that this text not be used as a prescribed, stand-alone text for students due to the variable level of difficulty between chapters. Chapters 2, 4, 6 and 7 are targeted at beginner students who have no experience with research methods but after review, it is suggested that they would best be applied to classes where students have at least some experience with research methods in social psychology and could maximise the potential benefits to be gained from the exercises. Chapters 5, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14 require some experience and chapters 3, 8 and 13 are most fitting for advanced students.

The book would be most well-suited as a lecturers’ handbook for teaching particular methods. Alternatively, post-graduate students who already have a grasp on the ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies available in social psychology as a resource once they and who would utilize the various chapters as a guide or reference when deciding to apply a specific method to a given problem.

Readers of the book would argue that the most outstanding feature of this text is its stand-alone usefulness as a source of references. Within and throughout each chapter, an excellent source of references is identified for referral to more detailed or slightly different descriptions of the particular research method. Additionally, some chapters offer directions on how to access software packages for data analysis on the web. Used correctly the contents of this book will prove helpful for new social psychology researchers wanting to better understand one of the particular research methods included and gain confidence through practice in its application.