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BOOK REVIEW
Handbook of emergent methods
Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy (Eds), 2010
New York, Guildford Press
£34.95, 740 pp.
ISBN 978-1-60918-146-8

This handbook introduces readers to both leftfield reinterpretations of traditional research strategies as well as novel approaches hitherto hidden from mainstream audiences. It describes theoretical and practical methods that are said to give researchers access to aspects of social reality overlooked by traditional methods. The methods are deemed ‘emergent’ insofar as they represent cutting-edge solutions to problems posed by interdisciplinarity and ‘paradigm interbreeding’ across the natural and social sciences (p. vi). In other words, what is presented in the Handbook of emergent methods is a description of methods that have been adapted or devised by researchers working in new academic spaces created by a postmodern meshing of research worldviews and agendas.

The handbook contains 32 review-length chapters and is divided into three parts. Part 1 describes the broad historical context of research innovation and emergent data gathering methods across an array of disciplines. The emergent methods are set against a backdrop of social and political change, theoretical and methodological development, and new perspectives in scientific standards. Although this part of the handbook emphasises the conditions that lead to a demand for research innovation, over a dozen adapted or newly devised methods are individually reviewed. Chapters include reviews of approaches in documentary research; grounded theory; interviewing; ethnography; and arts-based practice.

Part 2 of the handbook moves away from historical context and data gathering toward a review of alternative forms of research design and analysis. A large portion of Part 2 is dedicated to mixed method design (i.e., hybrid qualitative and quantitative design). Part 2 also explores interpretation and analysis and in doing so relates meaning-making processes to research design. Specifically, the chapters directly or indirectly address how concepts such as authenticity, trustworthiness, validity and reliability operate within the context of emergent research methods. Chapters in this part of the handbook include introductions to mixed method approaches; emergent techniques in data gathering and analysis; longitudinal research; connection strategies; metaphor analysis; and techniques for listening to multi-situated voices.

Part 3 of the handbook reviews the literature on how new technology is spearheading research innovations across the natural and social sciences. By discussing new applications of emergent technology to the research process, the authors explore the possible gains and potential problems that stem from such technologies.

In particular, they discuss the use of the Internet; mobile technologies; geospatial technologies; self-organizing maps; and the incorporation of computer assisted software to collect and analyse both qualitative and quantitative data. The editors envisage that the handbook will appeal to a wide readership, from advanced undergraduate students to
established researchers. Whilst the handbook will undoubtedly appeal to a range of students and researchers it may not appeal to each group equally. The handbook manages to describe the origin and use of a particular method in a fashion which should be understood by undergraduate researchers writing dissertations. The chapters offer sound introductions to methods that will no doubt support critical reflection about research strategies. However, the chapters are short and lack deep philosophical debates surrounding research epistemology and ontology that some UK postgraduate research courses will require. This is surprising given the rich philosophical vocabulary used in the handbook’s introduction to describe what emergent methods are and why they are needed. Nevertheless, the lack of sustained philosophical debate does not entirely negate the value of the handbook for postgraduate students. Instead, it requires that course providers situate the handbook against additional materials that offer more extensive paradigm critique, thus paving the way for a handbook that aims to describe ‘paradigm-defying’ methods. More established researchers will find this handbook to be an intriguing compendium that offers introductions to methods which are on the fringe of their disciplines. Furthermore, whilst the handbook is pitched at a level suitable for undergraduate finalists, the language of the handbook is still sophisticated enough to appeal to more experienced researchers. Having said this, the bite-sized chapters leave the experienced researcher yearning for more since breadth rather than depth is the handbook’s orientation.

The editors also envisage that the handbook will appeal to researchers across an array of social science disciplines where research method is being taught, used or developed. The vast array of methods described in the handbook ensures that many established social scientists are likely to find new material to explore. Having said this, the handbook is biased towards sociological and anthropological research at the expense of exploring innovations in other disciplines, including education. Educational researchers looking for subject-specific examples will be disappointed. And yet, the lack of chapters focusing purely on education is what makes the handbook appealing. Library shelves in the field of education are littered with reissued or slightly revised books on method which reiterate familiar strategies and perpetuate the same bland project designs over and over again. Standing outside of familiar territory and exploring unchartered terrain creates new ways of experiencing and understanding research, conceptually and practically. The Handbook of emergent methods is one important handbook that has the power to encourage educational researchers to breakdown archaic boundaries and try something different. From this perspective, the handbook is a success.

In summary, whilst the Handbook of emergent methods sacrifices depth and privileges sociological and anthropological innovation at the expense of demonstrating work in other disciplines, it still offers readers a wealth of resources distributed across numerous, concisely written introductory chapters. Readers from the field of education should expect a series of thought-provoking chapters written to inspire novel research design.

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