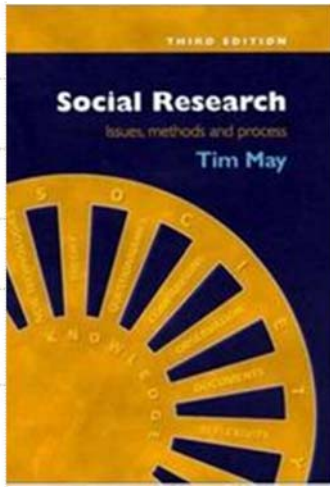


Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process. (3rd edition)

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| Author(s) | May, Tim |  |
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As the title suggests, the aim of this book is to bring together, in a single volume of modest size, a discussion of the issues, methods and processes of social research. This entails examining not only social theory, methodology and method, but also, importantly, the relationships between them in terms of, for example, the place of values and ethics in research practice. This book certainly manages to explore such relationships in an accessible way and while, not very far into chapter 1, it quickly gets into notions of objectivity and any numbers of -isms (from positivism through realism and idealism to postmodernism and feminism) the author, Tim May, always seems to be able to explain complex topics in a succinct and straightforward manner.

The book is structured into two parts. These are distinct yet there is always the feeling that suitable links are being made and, as a reader, it is possible to dip into particular sections reasonably easily. Part 1 of the book reviews a range of issues in social research. The three chapters in this section address how knowledge of the social world is gained, the relationships that are held to exist between theory and practice, and the place of values and ethics in the process of carrying out research. Part 2 of the book covers the methods that are used in social research, including, for example, surveys, interviewing, participant observation, and documentary and comparative research. Overall, each chapter is sensibly structured, giving enough background to each topic and issue to make it comprehensible, and with the later chapters flagging up concerns and dangers with each approach. Each chapter concludes with a highlighting of key issues, together with some questions for reflection and self-study (perhaps utilising the suggested further reading).

The great strength of the book is its successful negotiation (perhaps navigation) of the relationships between theory and method in (social) research. Some might think of this as bridging a formidable gap and any book that manages to do that in a readable way is eminently worthy of a place on a researcher's bookshelf or on the reading list for courses which cover elements of research training. The early chapters really do touch on major philosophical and methodological debates, while the later chapters (in Part 2) really do address practical issues of concern to researchers planning fieldwork (such as, for example, the issues involved in conducting a survey, including sampling, various types of questionnaires, different forms of questions, together with advice on coding and analysis).

Yet in spite of all these positive features, the way of structuring the material into two parts does mean that the book feels like it ends rather abruptly (in a summary, as it happens, of the potential and the problems of conducting comparative research). The chosen structure, for all its strengths and clarity, means that there is no space at the end of the book for

revisiting some of the challenging themes introduced and re-examined across the various chapters, especially, perhaps, the place of values and ethics in research practice. Perhaps a fourth edition could include a codicil which attempts to do just that (although, no doubt, the author has already thought of this and rejected the idea as unworkable).

Another issue with the book is that while various concerns and dangers associated with a range of research methods are flagged up, this is mainly restricted to practical concerns (such as the problems that can arise in comparative research related to using translations of documents) and to examples that support the overall intent of the book of relating theory, methodology and method (by, for example, drawing a parallel between postmodernism and the notion, in comparative research, that it is difficult to establish a general explanation of beliefs beyond their social context). That this book manages to do these things is a remarkable achievement yet such discussions do miss out one important part of the research experience. That is that research in general, and that includes social research, is increasingly being seen by Government agencies as yet one more component of the engine that drives the economy. Thus, for example, while 'critical theory' appears in the index, a reader will struggle to find any mention of the critiques of the value of social research (there is no mention, for example, of the pretty savage critiques of educational research). Nor will the reader find anything on the experimental method, something which the current US administration is decreeing to be the only allowable way of carrying out research in educational settings. That the scheduling of the release of the results of major comparative pupil achievement studies have been subject to manipulation for political ends (for example, to introduce some new national school testing regime, or not to negatively influence the chance of a presidential re-election) are not secrets. Yet no-where do such issues surface in this book. It is as if the debates about social theory, methodology and method occur in some cosy other world far away from the demands of some funders to produce results which demonstrate that whatever public policy that they are interested in is either working or not working, depending on their a priori position. Fortunately, at present such occurrences are rare, but when they are experienced they leave a lasting impression, something that this book singly fails to acknowledge.

Books intent on providing an introduction to research methods in the social sciences inevitably go over much of the same ground. What is interesting is how the differences amongst them are manifested (for example, how particular books are structured, what they emphasise, and how much depth of coverage is tackled). This book, by Tim May and now in its third edition, is pretty ambitious in seeking to address crucial issues in the relationships between theory and practice. As I observed (Jones, 2000), in a chapter reviewing the situated nature of research ethics in quantitative research, much can be gleaned from how much space books on quantitative research methods devote to ethical issues (not very much, on the whole, I found in a small survey). In much the same way, it is interesting to look at how books that go through several editions change with each re-issue. In this third edition of Tim May's book, for example, just over a page is given to all but one of the -isms tackled in the first chapter. Yet one -ism gets almost nine pages. It is not only the choice of which -ism it is that gets this extended treatment that is interesting (and it is certainly a most worthy choice), it is how these choices reflect the world of social research. It is almost as if, as this particular book heads towards its fourth, and quite possibly a fifth, edition, it is becoming a history of the changing nature of social research.

Despite any gripes that may be inferred from what is above, this third edition is undoubtedly a worthy successor to the earlier editions and deserves to be just as successful

Reference

Jones, K (2000). A regrettable oversight or a significant omission? Ethical considerations in quantitative research in education. In H. Simons and R. Usher (Eds.), *Situated Ethics in Educational Research* (pp147-161). London: Routledge. ISBN: 0415206669