

Review:

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Abstract: PUNCH's book is composed of 12 comprehensive and very accessible chapters on quantitative, qualitative and mixed empirical methods, intended for newcomers to the social sciences. This second edition of the book provides a wide range of illustrative examples, making it easier for the student to comprehend the basics of research. I would strongly recommend it to my undergraduate students as a practical and friendly guide for their studies.

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1. Overview

"Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches" by PUNCH provides the reader with an excellent introduction to the basics of both quantitative and qualitative research without losing sight of its target audience: undergraduate students undertaking any kind of social science inquiry. It is refreshing to come across this book, which does not aim to get into the complex and philosophical aspects of social research but provides all the necessary tools for grasping the very basics of scientific inquiry. The reader of this book will gain an excellent theoretical and practical insight into qualitative and quantitative research and also a practical application of the various methods offered within each paradigm. [1]

2. Organisation of Text

Chapter 1 ("Introduction") explores the centrality of methodology to the research process by looking at the relation between (a) methodology and methods, (b) methodology and theoretical perspective, and (c) methodology and epistemology. Methodology is one of the ways in which the research process is made transparent and it can be used as a strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods. Methodology can also link the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes (SILVERMAN 1987).

PUNCH links methodology to the theoretical perspective informed by a philosophical stance (e.g. positivism) and which provides a context for the process and a grounding for its logic and criteria. By looking at a researcher's methodology, the reader should be able to identify something about their theoretical and epistemological perspectives. The methodology will also be an indication of the kinds of methods the researcher is likely to be using. PUNCH concludes his first chapter by linking methodology and epistemology, that is, the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology. [2]

Chapter 2 ("Some Central Issues") deals with three themes that occur frequently throughout the book: description versus explanation, question-method connections, and structure in research questions. PUNCH explains clearly how to use theory to investigate the world and he uses as background the assumptions about how the world is (ontology) and how the reader should study it (epistemology) (HAMMERSLEY 1995). Positivist theory is introduced through (a) quantitative research (b) testing generalisations, and (c) survey research and official statistics. The constructionist approach is dealt with by introducing (a) qualitative research, (b) the exploration of meanings and methods, and (c) participant observation, focus groups, and in-depth interviewing. [3]

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the pre-empirical stage of research and focus on the development of research questions (De VAUS 1991). Here the reader is presented with some of the issues which he/she needs to consider in formulating research questions: (a) philosophical (e.g. ontological, epistemological), (b) practical/technical (e.g., sources of data, data collection and recording, techniques of analysis, resource availability-time, money, materials), (c) personal (e.g. the researcher's prior experiences, his/her political standpoint; his/her own motivations-political, emotional, professional, his/her social class, race, gender, sexual orientation), (d) ethical (e.g., codes of professional practice, self-regulation, dissemination of results and commissioners' role). [4]

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 give an overview of quantitative methods. PUNCH introduces the reader to the idea that empirical inquiry (derived from or relating to observation and enquiry rather than theory) and collection of facts can produce objective knowledge of the human moral and social order (CRESWELL 1994). He also argues that the proliferation of empirical inquiry has led to a world made sociological and at the same time transformed by numbers: (a) knowledge of facts would lead to knowledge of right action, (b) knowledge of facts of crime, madness, prostitution, disease and poverty would enable these phenomena to be understood and controlled, (c) facts revealed laws of human society that could be grasped by laws of large numbers. Finally, PUNCH introduces the term "Statistics" as vital to the this transformation, and also as lying at the heart of the type of thinking that became sociology. [5]

Going into more detail, Chapter 5 ("Quantitative Research Design") describes the main ideas involved in the design of quantitative studies. Chapter 6 ("Collecting Quantitative Data") considers what is involved in collecting quantitative data, and

the central role of measurement in that process. Chapter 7 ("The Analysis of Quantitative Data") describes the logic behind the main statistical techniques used in quantitative social science. [6]

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 give a similar overview of qualitative research methods, using the same general headings. Here PUNCH wonders whether the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity can be maintained in practice and to what extent is objectivity "subjective" and subjectivity "objective". He continues by saying that the notion of "experience" is central to qualitative work relating to the critique of objectivism/positivism epistemologies (STRAUSS, 1987). Some methods seem to be more suitable than others (e.g. semi-structured interviews, autobiographies, diaries, oral histories) and are often perceived to be a way of gaining "unmediated" access to experience—hence data appears to be "authentic". Yet experience in itself may not always be enough as the researcher and the researched are differently positioned: the researcher may have access to knowledge that is inaccessible through experience alone. Additionally, knowledge based on experience may be distorting things that are not subjectively "experienceable". In other words, experience does not always lead directly to critical awareness. PUNCH concludes that the experiences described in qualitative research are not always "raw"/pure data and they may represent interpretations that require further investigation. [7]

Taking this further, Chapter 8 ("Design of Qualitative Research") discusses the main strategies for use in qualitative research, and before that notes the complexity and diversity of contemporary qualitative research and two of its important perspectives (feminism and modernism). Chapter 9 ("Collecting Qualitative Data") deals with the main methods of data collection in qualitative research. Chapter 10 ("The Analysis of Qualitative Data") discusses issues involved in analysing qualitative data, focuses on two of the main approaches (i.e. analytic induction and grounded theory), and overviews several recent and more specialised approaches (e.g., narratives and meaning; ethnomethodology and conversational analysis; discourse analysis; semiotics; documentary and textual analysis). [8]

Chapter 11 ("Mixed Methods and Evaluative Criteria") deals with two different approaches with starting points: positivism and interpretivism. Here PUNCH introduces the concept of combining quantitative and qualitative methods and the likely benefits that might arise as a result of this, noting that the dichotomies which usually appear to distinguish them are often in reality blurred. PUNCH presents the reader with five dichotomies (qualitative versus quantitative data; the investigation of natural versus artificial settings; a focus on meanings rather than behaviour; an inductive versus a deductive approach; the identification of cultural patterns as against seeking scientific laws) and argues that for each one of these it is more a matter of a range of positions than a simple contrast. He also states, "that a position on one does not necessarily imply a position on another and that a selection among these positions should depend more on purposes and circumstances of the research than on philosophical considerations" (p.2). [9]

Chapter 12 ("Research Writing") deals with the general topic of research writing, discusses proposals in some detail, and notes some of the ethical issues involved in social research. PUNCH invites the reader to reflect on for whom they are writing and why they are writing. He argues that different audiences have different skills and different expectations. Different strategies need to be employed depending on the target audience (e.g., academic, policy-oriented, journalism, activist-oriented). Social research writing has to produce narratives that proceed from a beginning to an end and are about something. Finally, the final product (e.g., dissertation/thesis, research report, monograph, journal article, review) is generally written up to conform to the following structure: (a) introduction, (b) review of other work, (c) presentation and discussion of findings, (d) conclusion. [10]

Furthermore, it is important to add that at the end of each chapter of the book the main concepts covered in the chapter are brought together as review concepts and a glossary of terms is provided. The new edition of the book (first published in 1998) has (i) a new section on action research, (ii) an expanded section on discourse analysis and (iii) a more in-depth analysis of ethical issues [11]

3. Unique Contributions to Research Design

The most exciting aspect of PUNCH's book is his ability to clearly explain the measurement process, conceptualisation and operationalisation, and operational definitions during the early stages of the research design. Usually students find it hard to grasp the distinction between concept and variable and how they denote different stages in the measurement process. Furthermore, students fail to realise that there are two kinds of operational definitions, namely manipulated and measured. I personally found the first two chapters helpful in explaining to my students that the manipulation arises when the researcher wants to change the value of the variable and measurement operations set out to estimate the value of a variable (manipulation of an independent variable is by definition experimental). [12]

Another interesting aspect of the book is the section dealing with assessing the operationalisation of concepts, that is their validity. PUNCH examines the validity of concepts from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective. In the theoretical part he examines how good the link between concepts and indicators is and invites the reader to assess them according to how persuasive the researcher has been. In the empirical part, he presents questions such as: how good is the evidence for the indicator? Has the researcher made any obvious omissions? Are the generalisations of the findings valid? PUNCH then goes on to link sampling with valid generalisations and makes the distinction between representative sampling (usually aimed for in quantitative research) and theoretical sampling (usually aimed for in qualitative research). [13]

4. Applications and Audiences for the Text Organisation of Text

Data analysis preparation for undergraduate students conventionally has consisted of a required statistics course and a brief discussion of analysis strategies within introductory research courses. For students to view inquiry as integral to their practice, it is imperative that data analysis be taught in a manner whereby it may be incorporated into their repertoire of skills for social inquiry. The mathematical and theoretical emphasis of statistics courses often is problematic for students. They find it difficult to incorporate their learning of analysis into their knowledge of social inquiry. In addition, the predominantly lecture-based format may be didactic and preclude experiential learning about the process of analysis or the integration and synthesis of analysis strategies. Finally, given current trends in social research, the strictly quantitative content is insufficient without more emphasis on qualitative research. [14]

Students using this text have the opportunity to explore the nature of qualitative analysis through the processes of data collection, transcription, and analysis. Through critical reflection and examples they learn what it means to be immersed in data, and they learn to develop strategies for critically analysing, categorising, coding, and applying thematic analysis to the data. Given the concerns described above, it is reassuring to come across a book that addresses these deficiencies by presenting the essentials and main ideas of quantitative and qualitative research. [15]

I have used PUNCH's book in my undergraduate teaching and found that my students can easily develop a basic understanding of the issues involved in his arguments and of the ideas behind the main quantitative and qualitative techniques. What I also like about this book is the use of examples throughout the chapters to help illustrate and broaden the understanding of the material presented. Additionally, there is a section that deals with the use of computer software for the analysis of quantitative data (SPSS) and qualitative data (NVivo6) and which is very much enjoyed by the students because of its practical applicability. [16]

5. Summary

This book offers an excellent description of quantitative and qualitative design and analysis taught in the context of three inquiry pathways: knowledge development, social inquiry, and social research. Furthermore, it provides an excellent overview of both quantitative and qualitative methods with regard their different epistemologies, methods and techniques. Additionally, PUNCH provides (a) information guiding students in the use of computers for quantitative and qualitative analysis and (b) a wide range of illustrative examples to give the book a practical flavour. As he argues in the introduction: "This book is not a 'how to do it' book, but aims instead to develop a basic understanding of the issues involved and of the ideas behind the main techniques" (p.1). I personally agree with him and I would not hesitate to recommend it to my undergraduate students. [17]

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