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Designing research

Book review

Oppenheim, A N (1992) **Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement.** (2nd Edition) London: Pinter Publishers, ISBN 1 85567 044 5 (pbk), pp303, R94.87. ISBN 1 85567 043 7 (hbk).

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This new edition of Oppenheim's classic text has been revised and updated, as well as expanded to include chapters on research design and sampling, pilot work, questionnaire planning, and statistical analysis. As before, the opening chapters are given over to a practical and down-to-earth introduction to research design. The logic, stages and methodologies of design are outlined in a clear and systematic fashion, and the chapter on descriptive designs has been expanded to include a section on sampling and sampling procedures.

The section on questionnaire design and administration - undoubtedly the strong point of the text - has been extended to include chapters on pilot work and interviewing (both exploratory and standardised), while issues relating to questionnaire planning and construction are, as before, dealt with in a detailed and systematic way. Problems of validity and reliability are emphasised at all stages, and special issues in questionnaire design (e.g., respondent bias, response/refusal rates, attitude measurement and scaling) are comprehensively addressed.

The text concludes with an overview of data processing and data analysis. The chapter on data processing, which has been significantly updated and extended, provides the reader with a "user-friendly" introduction to data coding, data cleaning, and problems relating to missing data. As is the case throughout the book, key issues are illustrated through the frequent use of instructive examples and extensive references (which are both directed and evaluated) are provided.

Despite these improvements, however, I believe that this book, like the proverbial curate's egg, can best be described as being "good in parts". The chapters on questionnaire design and questionnaire wording - the primary focus of the original text - are excellent, and for this reason alone I would recommend the text to any person (student, professional, or researcher) who is likely to be involved in evaluating or carrying out social surveys. On the other hand, Oppenheim's attempt to extend the text to encompass both research design and statistical analysis fails to do justice to either topic.

With respect to research design, much of what Oppenheim has to say is directed towards an understanding of a particular form of survey: that is, the large scale survey in which population parameters are known, in which research questions and hypotheses are unilaterally determined by the researcher, in which the research questionnaire is the preferred form of data collection, in which the primary aim of research is either description or the identification of cause-effect relationships, and in which quantitative rather than qualitative methods of data reduction are preferred. As a consequence of this somewhat "conventional" focus a number of important issues in survey design are either ignored or simply glossed over. The assumption, for example, that surveys need necessarily be linked to a single technique for data collection precludes a discussion of innovative methods of data collection such as observation, content analysis of media reports, or post-coding of tape-recorded interviews (Marsh, 1982; Finch, 1986).

Other important issues in survey design, which are either ignored, or receive only cursory attention, include: (a) the philosophical basis underpinning the research process (e.g., positivist versus interpretative epistemologies); (b) models of research relationships, e.g., the researcher as "detached expert" versus the researcher as "cooperative" or "participating" inquirer (cf, Reason, 1988; Whyte, 1991); and (c) the value and relative methods of different forms of explanation (descriptive, causal, or meaning-based).

In addition, the debate surrounding the use of qualitative versus quantitative methods of data analysis (Wortman, 1983; Finch, 1986) is not touched upon, and no discussion is provided on the relative merits of experimental versus