

Research - the African way!

Book review

Bless, C & Higson-Smith, C (1995) **Fundamentals of social research methods: An African perspective**. (2nd edition). Cape Town: Juta.

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The bold title of this book suggests a local alternative in a market that is well traded, and firmly under the control of North American publishing houses. There are many good methodology texts on offer, and new ones need to provide something quite distinctive if they are to elbow their way into undergraduate courses at local universities. This one seems to offer an African perspective on what other texts treat as universal.

The authors indicate in their preface that the text is intended for use in African countries, by entry-level researchers, in a wide range of social science disciplines. The book aims to equip these researchers with knowledge and skills necessary to solve practical research problems. It is not aimed at students or practitioners of advanced research.

In fact, the book offers very little other than the fare usually found in mainstream methodology texts. The "African perspective" referred to in the title is created through extensive use of hypothetical examples of research problems and programmes likely to face researchers in African countries. For instance, to demonstrate the notion of "units of analysis", Bless & Higson-Smith provide the following example: "A researcher is interested in the physical health of people in a rural community. Using a medical screening procedure, this researcher collects medical data from 100 people (the units of analysis of this study) living in that community" (pp64-5).

Unemployment, alcohol abuse, worker absenteeism, and the education of peasant farmers, are other hypothetical examples used in the text to help elucidate methodological issues and methods. The problem is that the examples are only hypothetical, and presented in highly adumbrated form. They do not strike one as being anything like research. If Bless & Higson-Smith had provided examples of real research on these important social issues, as conducted in African countries, the claim of an African perspective would have been much more convincing.

If one views the book instead as another instance of a mainstream methodology text, however, it is quite good. Bless & Higson-Smith provide a useful synopsis of a range of methodological issues and techniques - indeed, there is little that they omit.

Early chapters address themselves to questions concerning the nature of "the scientific method", problem definition and conceptualisation, and hypothesis formulation. A brief overview is given in respect of different types of research. The discussion here is reasonable, middle-of-the-road stuff, except when the authors deal with questions surrounding the nature of science and scientific enquiry. They do this badly, completely failing to mention the many different theoretical and philosophical positions, and failing in addition to provide a single citation.

Later chapters deal with research design, sampling and subject selection, fundamental measurement issues, techniques of data collection, and reliability and validity of measurement. This is done ably, compactly, and with an up-to-date eye on recent developments like program evaluation and meta-analysis. What is alarming, though, is the (continued) failure to cite any published sources. When Bless and Higson-Smith discuss the well known catalogue of threats to validity originally published by Campbell (history, maturation, regression - the litany will be familiar to many), they fail to cite him, or even mention his name. The bibliography contains a (misspelled) reference to the 1966 book by Campbell and Stanley, but the incomplete, inaccurate and inconsistently formatted list of references there does not restore one's trust, and certainly does not provide a good example to entry level students.

The final chapters of the book deal with the interpretation of research results, the evaluation of published studies, and the writing of research reports. Again, this is done ably, and economically.

In sum, *Fundamentals of social research methods: An African perspective* offers a compact, well priced introduction to mainstream research methodology. It is not a bad alternative to the usual, formulaic North American volume, but it also does not deliver the African perspective it promises in its title.