Review of Handbook of Emergent Methods, by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy
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from individuals to international policies (and back again). They offer an innovative conceptual framework rooted in sociological theories that include rational choice and life course perspectives. Virtually no stone is left unturned in their examination of the gender paradox; the coverage is encyclopedic.

At the same time, a standpoint dilemma hangs over the work. Although single adults are discussed (especially in chapters 5 and 6), the authors’ thematic device to illustrate their main points is a middle-class married couple with young children. Given the relatively small number of Americans living in this particular household arrangement, the choice appears off the mark. The ongoing demographic transition resulting in disproportionate numbers of older adults (especially women) looms large over any discussion of the gender paradox in the twenty-first century. Another potential limitation lies in the attempt to understand health disparities by elevating individual behaviors over structural factors. Bird and Rieker are diligent in discussing such extraindividual factors, but their reliance on rational choice theory (however modified to accommodate constraints) underplays the role of social inequalities.

Notwithstanding these concerns, this book is a must-read for policy analysts, public health planners, researchers from diverse fields, and anyone interested in gender and health disparities. Bird and Rieker do not shy away from the many unanswered questions concerning the gender paradox. Their willingness to grapple with numerous, often discrepant empirical findings benefits the reader who seeks to tap into the state of current knowledge on gender and health.

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The Handbook of Emergent Methods, edited by sociologists Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, is a timely resource for graduate students and seasoned researchers alike. Innovations in research, driven by breakthroughs in theory and technology, have deepened understanding of social life and at times have created head-spinning quandaries concerning the translation of emergent knowledge back to our disciplinary homes. A guide to the historical roots of current methodological debates and to the deployment of new methods across the social and behavioral sciences, the Handbook also provides exemplary models for the documentation of methodological innovation and its application to future research.

As an interpretive researcher with interdisciplinary training in anthropology and social work, I was enthusiastic to find a text that documents methods employed across disciplinary boundaries. The editors’ assertion that there is a growing need for methodological diversity is particularly relevant to social work and social service research given the transformative contexts of globalization, technological innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The editors also note that paradigm shifts call into question traditional approaches to research, renewing debates about what constitutes an object of study, power relations between researcher and research subject, and the relation of evidence to the role of theory.

Part I of the Handbook consists of 17 chapters that review the historical context
of innovations in the practice of document research, grounded theory, interviewing, ethnography, and arts-based practice. Authors were asked to address the possible applications of their method and to include examples of relevant research questions. The authors also discuss the limitations of their methods. Although the depth of the authors’ reflexivity varies, such exercises may benefit readers considering their options. For researchers who creatively adapt their research methods, often while the research is in progress, this format sets an example for how, in the words of Karen Staller, Ellen Block, and Pilar Horner, to “introduce coherency” (48) in the process of innovation.

Several chapters address the influence of postmodern and interpretive approaches to research, offering suggestions for quantitative and qualitative methods. Staller and colleagues (chap. 1) chart the various approaches to “writing a history” (26). They use a postmodern interpretive lens to examine the diverse trends in historical methods and to reflexively discuss their historical analysis of methods in the social sciences. Staller and colleagues provide empirically based analysis of what they call the methodological revolution. They argue that this revolution, which began in the 1970s, is fueled in part by tensions between positivist and postmodern philosophies. They also trace its origin to the advent of the personal computer, which facilitated a broad use of statistical methods.

Lisa Cosgrove and Maureen McHugh (chap. 3) further document paradigmatic shifts marked by post-Newtonian or postmodern approaches to science that challenge the belief in an “unmediated relationship between the world and our knowledge of it” (73). This shift is exemplified by attention to the researcher as a possible variable in the research process. For example, the influence of strong objectivity in feminist research and the crisis in representation that has transformed the practice of ethnography both contend with how the researcher’s subjectivity shapes the research question, data generation, and data analysis. With regard to survey research, Frederick Conrad and Michael Schober (chap. 8) demonstrate that conversational approaches based on collaborative views of language can increase accuracy of survey responses, contradicting conventions that preference standardized interviewer behavior.

Several chapters in Part I review the emergent qualities in methods that have become conventional, though they were innovations themselves when first introduced. Chapters on grounded theory, focus group research, and oral history similarly document efforts to adapt methods in ways that draw attention to the standpoint of the researcher as well as to his or her interactions with the research subject and data generated for analysis.

Some chapters in Part I overlap in their use of method and theoretical inspiration, but rather than being redundant, they detail various researchers’ responses to philosophical turns (e.g., reflexivity, subjectivity, embodiment, co-construction of reality) that span disciplinary boundaries. In particular, the chapters on ethnography and arts-based practice illustrate how the narrative and performative turns have shaped the subject of research, the role of the researcher in coconstructing the narrative, and the genres in which research results are conveyed. Furthermore, the blurring of the line between research and activism is evident in the chapters on public ethnography, critical ethnography, and performance-based methods. Attention to modes of description, engagement in social critique and activism, and performance are employed to “get at and represent dimensions of social life that would otherwise remain invisible” (356) in academic discourse.

Part II of the Handbook focuses on the mechanics of design and analysis, attempting to enable research that attends to questions not addressed by conventional practices. Several chapters are devoted to mixed-method design and discussion of ways to coordinate quantitative data collection with qualitative
efforts. Sarah Irwin’s technique (chap. 20) for interpreting evidence discusses ways to attend to the subjective and partial dimensions of any research method. Irwin frames mixed methods by suggesting that they access different levels of “the social” (416). She posits that data are not theory-neutral but carry embedded assumptions that represent a partial view of reality. Irwin’s approach to interpreting multiple forms of data has the potential to enhance the overall analysis of social life.

The remaining chapters in Part II offer a set of analytic techniques for interpreting meaning and for meaning making in narrative data. For example, Lynn Sorsoli and Deborah Tolman present the “Listening Guide” (495) as a technique for tracing more than one voice within a given narrative. Their contribution echoes points raised in other chapters, emphasizing the importance of context in narrative analysis. They also discuss this voice as an embodied entity.

Part III of the Handbook is dedicated to the ways in which information technologies and digitalization are catalysts for change. The Internet represents one arena in which technology has increased access to information while also introducing a new forum in which social processes unfold. In considering changes inaugurated by the Internet, these chapters explore the Internet as both vehicle and site for social change. This exploration includes several points of focus, from theorizing techniques to map how documents are shared and move via the Internet to considering how the Internet shapes social life across interpersonal, organizational, and geopolitical relations. Part III also discusses the new forms of data captured via audio and video recording technologies, the effects of using computers to solve many linear and nonlinear equations at once, and the use of technology to represent research results through multiple forms of media (e.g., video, CD-ROM, three-dimensional interactive DVD).

The volume’s final two chapters provide historical perspectives on the development of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software and its varied use and applications in the social sciences. The development of QDA software has transformed researchers’ capabilities to capture, manage, and analyze large volumes of textual, audio, and visual data. However, the authors note that these software packages tend to reflect the assumptions and methods employed in grounded theory, a common approach used by researchers who were instrumental in the development of QDA software. Considering the influence of postmodern and poststructural sensibilities that heighten attention to voice, subjectivity, and context, Nigel Fielding (chap. 32) suggests the need to assess the role of QDA software in light of these epistemological debates.

One fundamental weakness of the Handbook lies in the editors’ use of the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy to define research approaches by whether they analyze numeric or textual data. The quantitative-qualitative divide is commonly used across disciplines to categorize types of data generated through research. However, the editors miss an opportunity to include current methodological debates that reject the artificial dichotomy and argue for better articulation of the ontological-epistemological commitments that influence innovation. For example, in the analysis of coconstructed survey research interviews, Conrad and Schober (chap. 8) share a concern for subjectivity in the interview process with the chapters that discuss different approaches to narrative ethnography. Despite the editors’ use of the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy to organize the volume, several chapters in the volume transcend this dichotomy by illustrating how interpretive analysis of language, power, subjectivity, and representation foster new techniques to understand social and behavioral phenomena.

As an edited volume, the Handbook suitably reflects the breadth of methods
and epistemological orientations employed across the social and behavioral sciences. The text as a whole may not function well as an introduction to research methods, because many chapters assume a level of fluency in methodological concepts. For example, Natalia Sarkisian’s (chap. 30) detailed discussion of neural network analysis requires a basic understanding of the logic of linear and nonlinear equations, if not competency in the use of algorithms to model social phenomena. However, individual chapters, particularly those that include historical overviews of how methods have developed over time, offer insight and practical examples regardless of one’s level of exposure to and experience with research.

This volume has a lot to offer students, teachers, researchers, and anyone else looking to grasp the cutting-edge techniques in motion across social and behavioral science disciplines. For those seeking to develop a particular set of skills in one methodology (e.g., ethnography or mixed-method design), specific chapters may be useful and others more peripheral. As someone who recently earned her doctorate, I found this volume to be immensely helpful in rejuvenating the praxis of reflexivity. Apart from the new techniques it describes, this volume has great potential to raise awareness. It also promises to improve accountability and heuristic evaluation by providing direction for those who conduct research on practice.

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