The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods

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Introduction

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PART 1

Personal reflections on research careers
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INTRODUCTION

Patsy Healey

Doing good research is not just a question of following appropriate technical procedures. It takes complex judgements, imaginative insight and intense critical exploration of the topic in hand. Research requires professional skill, just as doing good planning work does. And as with the development of planning skills, it takes education, experience and time to mature. How can we build these skills in the planning field? To introduce this question and the book as a whole, we begin the discussion of research methods with biographical profiles of planning researchers, to illuminate the diverse personal journeys people have taken in developing their research focus and expertise. These profiles are not just career descriptions. They are also reflections on many of the conceptual, methodological and institutional issues raised in the rest of this book.

The profiles are by some of the editors, and a few others, to reflect a range of research careers and academic/practice environments. Finally, we were very pleased when John Forester agreed to add his paper, which had been circulating for some years informally, on how he learned the art of academic writing. So we have contributions from myself and John, now in or near semi-retirement; Mee Kam Ng and Heather Campbell, in senior professorial positions; with Neil Harris and Elisabete A. Silva, at mid-career stage. Our research training and experience range from the UK, Portugal, Hong Kong and the US. We all acquired doctorates, the younger ones in the context of well-structured programmes. Some of us, in addition to doctorates, acquired children as well! All of us have been challenged by the demands of combining research activity with practical work, social activism, academic teaching and our non-academic commitments. And we have all stumbled along through pitfalls and uncertainties, which somehow are always present, however experienced you are. So we hope these personal reflections will give some reassurance to those starting out on a doctoral programme or an academic career in the planning field about how to get through what lies ahead!

All of us are different, and so each reflection is different in style and content. But several themes emerge across the contributions. One is how we got into the planning field and then discovered that we were absorbed by research inquiry. As with life trajectories in general, our stories show a mixture of accident, personal background, inspirational teachers and work experiences, encouraging supervisors, a book or paper which showed us how to go on, and growing self-awareness about what we really wanted to do. Several of us did not expect to become researchers, and found out only through doing it that undertaking research inquiry driven by the problems and dilemmas of the practical world was such an absorbing and rewarding activity.
All of us, however, have been stimulated by the complex relation between research and practical activity.

Another theme is the variable experience of an academic environment in the planning field. Heather and John have some harsh words to say about how academics behave! Heather sought to change her academic environment through creating a different departmental culture. John provides advice about how to make constructive use of the criticism we receive, however motivated. All of us have had to combine the varied demands of working in an academic context in a field which also values practical engagement, and have found that such engagement has often inspired our academic work. Neil and I have undertaken consultancy contracts from an academic position. Mee Kam has linked her teaching and research work with active community involvement. Elisabete focuses on skill development in spatial analysis, drawing on practice involvements. Heather has used her experience in academic organization to learn about practical engagement, while John has focused his research on how practitioners go about their work. But it is never easy to manage the competing demands of practical engagement, while John has focused his research on how practitioners go about their work. Yet, as John stresses, teaching is not a distraction from research work, but can help to consolidate and contextualise research activity.

Our collective experiences also illustrate that research work in the planning field is done in many different social contexts. Sometimes we work in an individual way, in control of our own project from start to finish – rather like a standard PhD but without the supervisor. But often we work in teams, and we have to pay attention to research funders or practice-based clients. This book has examples of research activity in all kinds of institutional positions, and these personal reflections give an introduction to the challenges of different situations. And there are always tensions between the demands of a situation – to get a contract completed, to stick within a budget, to get the PhD written up and examined – and the time it takes for our ideas, insights and understanding to mature, to get ‘cooked’, as John explains. One of the advantages of an academic career is that a research interest can build through the years, allowing us to explore different avenues and make mistakes as we go along. John and I can confirm that we do not always agree with the written work of our younger selves. It is not only our ideas and interpretations which develop, grow, shift and change with time. It also takes time to build an academic research career. Elisabete gives good advice on how to go about this, having moved in her trajectory from Portugal, to the US and then to the UK. She emphasises the importance not just of doing research but also of getting published so that our work is recognised and shared. John takes us into the spills and setbacks of the writing experience. Heather warns against trying to mimic the established disciplines too closely. Instead, she argues, we should aim to combine good scholarship with the special insights which come from our engagement with planning practices.

So these biographical reflections will take readers into the messy business of becoming a researcher in the planning field and doing research through an academic lifetime. It takes time and struggle to build skills, experience and confidence, and a good dose of determination as well. But we all acknowledge the great good fortune we have had in finding ourselves contributing to, and continuing to learn from, a rich and stimulating vein of academic scholarship and practical endeavour.