The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods

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Introduction

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PART 2

The craft of research
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2.1

INTRODUCTION

Patsy Healey

Filled with a mixture of enthusiasm and nervousness, the novice researcher often feels the need to get immersed in empirical material at the start of a research project, to gather data and somehow build up a study from this. The chapters in this part of the book urge all researchers to resist this temptation! (See overall introduction.) Instead, it is important to stand back from the issues and problems which lead us to be interested in a specific topic and to consider the nature of the research to be undertaken. Such reflection will lead to some significant conceptual and methodological choices which will shape how a research question is set, the nature of the analysis undertaken and the way the validity of findings are to be judged. What issue or problem is the focus of the research study? What contribution will it make to the accumulation of planning knowledge, and/or addressing a specific, practical dilemma? What paradigms – perspectives on the world – shape the way you as the researcher are thinking about the problem or issue and how does this affect the relationships to be explored? How does this shape the methods which will be appropriate for the research? Who is the audience for the study and how will this influence how its robustness and validity will be judged?

The chapters in this part aim to help planning researchers think about these broader questions. But do not expect simple answers or recipes. There are no neat single answers. As outlined in the overall introduction, the planning field draws on several disciplinary traditions and intellectual perspectives. There are even disagreements about the focus of the planning field itself (e.g., contrast the definitions of planning provided by Moulaert and Mehmood in Chapter 2.5 and by Webster in Chapter 2.6). This eclectic diversity is a potential strength, as it provides a rich conceptual and methodological array available to the researcher. But approaching this range demands a creative mixture of imagination and rigour. Careful choices have to be made about how an initial research puzzle will be translated into a specific research question, analytical approach and detailed methods. To be robust, given the range of possibilities, researchers in our field need to think explicitly about what will make the findings of our project acceptable as valid ‘truth claims’, with what caveats and in what contexts. If such choices are not well made and well justified, findings of a study will be exposed to the kind of criticism which Webster makes (Chapter 2.6). The chapters in this part are therefore aimed to set you thinking. Some help to scope the range within which specific choices about strategy and method will be made. Others present a particular approach, from within their preferred perspective. Do not expect agreement! If we
authors were all in a seminar room together, some disputes would surely break out. Readers are encouraged to think about these as a way of clarifying the choices each will come to make. The rest of this chapter sketches out the rich resources to be found in the chapters.

In Chapter 2.2, du Toit introduces the general challenge of designing a research strategy and the range of possibilities for research studies in the planning field. He encourages researchers to think about the logic of a research strategy. He introduces various typologies which have been developed to distinguish different kinds of research. He links these to broad paradigms (positivist, interpretive and critical) about how to think about the world and how it works which inform methodological choices. He then develops these typologies to classify research designs in the planning field, richly illustrated with examples of such studies for readers to follow up. In Chapters 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7, authors position themselves very clearly within a specific perspective, and readers may be interested to review du Toit’s chapter after having read them. However, du Toit does not argue that we have to make an exclusive choice between perspectives and methods. A research design may mix inspirations. In such cases, it is even more important to be explicit and systematic about choices made and the resultant logic of a research study.

Making such choices to arrive at a research design is a complex and value-laden process, even where a study is positioned within the positivist paradigm so common in the sciences. As a result, research activity is infused with ethical issues. In Chapter 2.3, Thomas and Lo Piccolo review how values enter choices involved in research activity, and the kinds of ethical issues which arise at different stages of a research project. They introduce the role of formal codes of research ethics and explain their value and limitations. They underline, however, that doing research is a social practice, only marginally affected by formal codes. Much more important is the research culture. They argue that what we research and how we do it are deeply affected by the institutional position from which we engage in research and the reasons why we do it. For researchers in the planning field, these institutional issues are especially challenging, because of the action orientation and value commitments which infuse the field (see overall introduction). Thomas and Lo Piccolo underline that there will be struggles over research paradigms and appropriate methods, with claims that some are more ‘robust’ than others. Such struggles may not be easy — for example, when a novice researcher begins to pull away from the preferred paradigm of a supervisor. Thomas and Lo Piccolo emphasise the importance of developing a culture of research practice which encourages such critical questioning and recognises that different research designs and logics are possible. Campbell in Chapter 1.5 describes her efforts to build such a ‘community of researchers’ among a group of doctoral students.

The next two chapters expand the discussion to consider research designs which involve comparisons, especially cross-national comparisons. These became common in the context of increasing integration among the planning research community in Europe from the 1990s, but are increasingly conducted across all parts of the world. In our field, it is inevitable that such studies have to confront the complex political-institutional differences between countries and cultures which affect how planning activity is understood and practiced. In Chapter 2.4, Booth introduces the challenge of cross-national research. He argues that all comparisons involve making some assumptions about similarities and differences. In the planning field, our focus in making comparisons is typically on qualities of places and of governance activity. Booth draws on a long research career comparing the philosophy and practice of development regulation between England and France. Apparently similar intervention tools and practices turn out, on investigation, to arise from very different governance cultures and histories, which shape the institutions and practices through which planning work is done. Booth also notes the significance of language, some concepts in one language being untranslatable in another. He argues that research
designs involving cross-national comparisons need to allow the time and space to grasp these important contextual dynamics.

In some of the work he refers to, Booth introduces the challenge of working with research teams in different countries and the importance of a common framework to guide the work of the different teams. This challenge is addressed directly in Chapter 2.5, where Moulaert and Mehmood draw on a range of large-scale, EU-funded, multi-sited research projects conducted in recent years. The particular focus of these projects has been on processes of social innovation in urban neighbourhoods. This work has been inspired by a normative concern to explore how collective action can make a difference to people’s lives in situations of difficulty and marginality. The teams involved in this work have come not only from different countries but also have been multidisciplinary, demanding what Moulaert and Mehmood call a ‘post-disciplinary’ approach. The key to holding such an ambitious research challenge together lies in the development of a ‘meta-framework’. They recognise that each situation investigated will have its own special characteristics and that the individual research teams need the freedom to work with the distinctive dynamics of each research site. But, at the same time, the individual cases need to be developed so that they can address the questions specified in the meta-framework, which itself is developed collaboratively among the research team as a whole. The challenge is then to identify recognisable patterns across the cases, which can be substantiated by robustly investigated empirical findings. Ontologically, this approach is positioned in a combination of du Toit’s ‘interpretive’ and ‘critical’ traditions. It also draws on the reflexive methodology of inquiry advocated by pragmatist philosophy, and especially the ‘holistic’ approach to analysing the relations between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’.

In Chapter 2.6, Webster reiterates the importance of rigorous research design and robust empirical methods in the conduct of planning research. Like Moulaert and Mehmood, he is concerned with how generalisable knowledge can be created from disparate experiences through the search for, and testing of, patterns of behaviour. But he approaches this challenge from a different intellectual perspective. He locates himself within the behavioural tradition of emerging work on evolutionary spatial economics. His focus is on understanding the relationship between patterns of behaviour and patterns of urban form. This leads him to focus on individual behaviour, in contrast, for example, to Booth’s focus on culture. Ontologically, therefore, he is a ‘methodological individualist’. Epistemologically, he advocates the research methodology promoted by Karl Popper for the generation and refutation of hypotheses about such patterns. The core of his chapter is about what the methodology of refutation means for the design of a research project. But Webster does not lead us into an abstract discussion. He is deeply concerned with the development of robust ways to address the questions which politicians and practitioners ask – about the relation between health and urban form, or the behaviour of land and property markets. His chapter is a call to improve the quality of planning scholarship through carefully focused empirical investigation.

In Chapter 2.7, Palermo and Ponzini draw on a very different planning culture, with respect to both academic discipline and planning institutions and practices. In Italy, the planning discipline and its practices are still deeply influenced by the architecture and design disciplines. This leads Palermo and Ponzini to an interest in the way designing a project can itself be a tool of research inquiry. They introduce their discussion by positioning this tradition within a review of planning theory perspectives. They contrast the ‘positivist’, rational decision-making approach with pluralistic and communicative approaches, and seek to evolve the latter into an explorative research method centred on producing project ideas. In this way they arrive at ‘design hypotheses’, similar to those referred to by Webster. They then illustrate these approaches through the
work of three leading Italian planners from the 1930s to the present, arguing that the working methods of these exponents have been neglected in more recent discussions of planning theory and method. Palermo and Ponzini’s argument is that linear conceptions of how research feeds into planning processes need to be abandoned in favour of more recursive and interactive approaches, as Moulaert and Mehmood also advocate. They also make a plea for more interaction and synergy between social science and architectural traditions of research in the planning field.

These chapters thus develop different approaches and arguments about the conduct of research in the planning field. They all advocate thinking carefully through conceptual and methodological issues, to focus a study into a researchable design, the logic of which can be explained and justified clearly. This may seem a hard challenge, but it need not be overcomplicated or ambitious. Nor should the search for an orderly research logic crowd out insight and imagination. As the reflections of researchers in Part 1 highlight, research inquiry is often a messy process, through which researchers develop their conceptual ideas as we learn through our inquiries. Research work is full of surprises, and flashes of understanding, along with the potential for wrong turnings and confusion. An initial research design may serve merely to provide helpful stepping stones or walking sticks as we embark on a journey into the as yet unknown. In the end, however, the report on that journey – the findings – has to be pulled together into a coherent and convincing account. A robust research study which produces useful findings lays out its approach explicitly, specifies the conceptual basis on which relationships are investigated, reports how and why empirical data were collected and the limits which apply to it, and explains the specific contexts in which such findings may have validity as ‘truth claims’. In a world where knowledge claims fly about often with little empirical support, this is surely an important contribution which planning research can make.