PART 5

Methodology in action
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5.1

METHODOLOGY IN ACTION

The relationship between research and practice

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Introduction

Every researcher, no matter what the nature of his or her individual research endeavour or project, is required to reflect on the relationship between his or her research activity and the world of practice. This is equally true of the ‘blue skies’ researcher, whose relationship to practice may be long-term, indirect and diffuse, as it is the contract researcher engaged in conducting short-term, client-driven research who is expected to effect change in existing policy or practice. Chapter 1.1 sketched out some of the relationships between research and practice and the chapters in this part of the book explore that relationship further. Some contributions focus on conceptualising the relationship between research and practice, providing us with several different models for thinking about the nature of that relationship. These range from a traditional understanding of research informing practice to a more open and collaborative understanding of the role of stakeholders in the production of knowledge through research activity. Other contributions explore the application of specific concepts in practice, identifying the nature of specific methodologies as they cross over into the world of practice. The common theme running through the chapters is that of research as a collaborative exercise extending well beyond the academic community, in which many varied stakeholders with different perspectives and backgrounds are engaged. These different backgrounds may in some cases be addressed through thinking carefully about how research is conducted and how researchers communicate with their different audiences. Yet in other cases – particularly, but not exclusively, in non-Western contexts – engaging with these different stakeholders may present more fundamental challenges to how research is conceptualised and also to which methodologies are considered appropriate.

Conceptualising the relationship between research and practice

Chapter 5.2, by Davoudi, explores the important question of the practical value of the research that is carried out by academics, whether they are engaged in ‘blue skies’ research or the production of evidence for more immediate and practical reasons. Her chapter asserts that assessing the impact of research – and especially that which is publicly funded – is a legitimate concern, yet the increasing focus on measuring research impact has many risks and challenges associated
with it. One of the most significant points made by Davoudi is that how we conceptualise the relationship between research and impact and the relationship between research and practice can be critical. Drawing on her own experience of leading an initiative to foster the exchange of research information and knowledge between academics and practitioners, she highlights how conceptualising this relationship in one form rather than another can undermine efforts to shape and inform practice. The chapter also identifies how our research outputs and findings can be also be used symbolically, perhaps appropriated in defence of arguments and positions that we did not anticipate when conducting and disseminating our research. Davoudi concludes with a defence of the role of the public intellectual, which she sees as under threat, but also emphasises the need to recognise research as a diffuse set of practices involving a wide range of different actors.

It is this open, collaborative and participative dimension of research that characterises the field of transdisciplinary research. Chapter 5.3, by Moulaert and Cassinari, relays a research project, Social Polis, that involved a significant number of stakeholders from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, each with their different knowledge, culture and practices. They identify similar challenges to Davoudi in thinking about research activity as a cooperative activity involving participants drawn from within and beyond academic research communities. They distinguish transdisciplinary research from other, perhaps better-known terms, such as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. They argue that transdisciplinary research is of particular value in addressing questions and issues characterised by uncertainty and complexity, and so its link to spatial planning issues and problems is potentially very significant. There is an emphasis in their account on the role played by stakeholders in the research process, and the varied challenges of engaging and communicating with stakeholders as an active part of the process of conducting research. The authors’ reference to working with concepts and ideas continuously ‘in construction’ by and with stakeholders presents real challenges to those researchers whose practices are based on defining concepts at early stages of the research process. The chapter is of particular value for anyone engaging in a transdisciplinary research project and facing the prospect of engaging with stakeholders who, both literally and metaphorically, may speak many different languages.

Research in practice contexts

One of the key distinctions thrown into sharp relief by the contributions in this part of the book is that between academic research and other, practical forms of research. Chapter 5.4, by Peel and Lloyd, focuses on one of these areas of applied or practical research through exploring research commissioned by government to inform policymaking. Their account shares with others the characteristic of a research environment composed of a variety of different interests and stakeholders. They outline the ways in which the highly political, immediate and pragmatic research environment for government-commissioned research differs from the traditional academic research environment. The chapter will provide valuable insight for any academic venturing into the world of government-commissioned research, in which others define the research questions, steer the outputs arising through the process and influence the manner in which the research is disseminated and assessed. Peel and Lloyd set out the distinctive contribution that academics can make to client-driven research, particularly in challenging established ideas and ensuring that research is based on robust conceptualisation.

The relationship between academic research and practice is also at the core of Duminy’s account in Chapter 5.5 of research methodology in the context of Africa. The chapter explains
the necessity of aligning the research training provided in university curricula with the specific demands of planning practice in African countries. The documented efforts to embed case study research methodology at the core of African planning schools’ research design and methods training are a response to the need for practitioners to engage with the informality of African settlements and a distinctive, African urbanism. The traditional focus of African planning schools’ methodology on survey design has been complemented with that of case study methodology which better addresses some of the real and practical issues facing planners in Africa. The chapter acts as a reminder that research methods training is not delivered exclusively or principally as a means of completing a dissertation, thesis or academic research project, but also for engaging meaningfully in practice contexts. Duminy’s point on research training embedding a distinctive set of values, as well as practical skills, is also an important one. Despite its very different setting, Chapter 5.6, by Zhang and Wang, similarly outlines how traditional or established methodologies in China are increasingly subject to pressure for change in the face of emerging patterns and trends. The account in the chapter of urban planning in China emphasises the importance of several traditional, physical planning methodologies, albeit ones infused with a distinctive Chinese philosophy and ethics. Zhang and Wang argue for a renewal of expertise to address increasingly complex social, economic and environmental issues. Drawing on physical planning traditions, and the use of SWOT analyses (analysis of strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats), one of their key points is that many plans are not made on a sufficiently scientific basis, and that many of the applied methods in masterplanning exhibit important weaknesses. The chapter paints a picture of a need for development in research methods to equip planners to deal with the scale and pace of change in Chinese cities and regions.

Lloyd and Peel’s earlier chapter highlights that one of the distinctive contributions that academics can make to practical research projects is rigorous conceptualisation. This theme of conceptualisation is developed further by Chapter 5.7, by Törnqvist, on the renewal of industrial areas in Sweden. His chapter explains how various research projects were used to better understand apparent conflicts between planners and others in how they approached specific planning issues. By exploring the concepts in use among both planners and small industrial businesses, a better understanding of the issue of industrial estate renewal was attained. The key lesson from the account is that research can serve as a basis for constructive dialogue, better understanding and even consensus among different participants. One of the means of achieving this is using research to reveal a different picture or outline alternative ways of understanding the character and nature of problems.

Stakeholder participation in research

The theme of participation in policymaking and practical problem solving is continued in Sager’s chapter (5.8), addressing the use and application of cost-benefit analysis (CBA). CBA is a well-established and renowned method that is regularly applied to investment projects. It often features as part of the justification for large-scale infrastructure projects, and it is in that respect that it interfaces with planning systems. Sager’s exploration of CBA focuses on how established methods and techniques, such as CBA, need to be adapted to processes of participation and deliberation. Several significant points are made in Sager’s chapter that are useful ones for anyone engaged in the use of methods and techniques in practical contexts. One of these key points is that evaluation methods, and other similar methods, used in practice are underpinned by certain ethical frameworks or positions that can be revealed and subjected to critique. Sager consequently identifies several key questions that lay participants engaged in a process involving CBA.
might ask of the method. Another of the lessons that Sager draws is that methods and techniques should reflect the values held and expressed by citizens if they are to be appropriate. So, what Sager offers us is an example of how citizens can challenge and adapt established methods used in planning practice, and how we as academics and researchers can also subject these established techniques to critique.

The final two chapters in this part address the common theme of participation of defined groups in the formulation, design and implementation of land use planning policies. The focus of Chapter 5.9 is on the charrette as a specific form of research activity for engaging stakeholders in policymaking and decision making. In that chapter, Kotval and Mullin provide very practical advice on the conduct of research charrettes, from their design through to their application and interpretation. Drawing on their experience as researchers who have applied charrettes in a variety of contexts, they distil a series of working principles for the use of charrettes. One of the key benefits of the charrette as a research method, they argue, is its capacity to engage with both expert and experiential knowledge to the benefit of the policy- and decision-making process. Chapter 5.10, by Uttke, Machemer and Kotval, also addresses the use of charrettes, but as part of a wider series of methods and techniques for the creative and innovative engagement of children and young people. Their chapter instructs us to think carefully about how we communicate our research findings and our policy goals to specific audiences, and to tailor our methods to the needs of our intended audiences. The work that Uttke and her colleagues have conducted demonstrates the need to think creatively about our research activities, as well as the ability for research activity to perform an educative function.

**Conclusion**

The chapters in this part collectively urge us all to think carefully about the relationship between research and practice. It may be that we are seeking to achieve various forms of impact through our academic research, looking to build knowledge and explore understanding across disciplinary boundaries, hoping to bring robust conceptualisation to the messy world of practice, or committed to engaging specific stakeholders in producing knowledge and understanding about the world. In each of these tasks we operationalise an understanding of the relationship between research and practice; the way in which we do that will have important implications for the design of our research and the impacts and effects of our research activity.