

2004

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#### Publication Information

Baronov, David (2004). "Navigating the Hidden Assumptions of the Introductory Research Methods Text.." *Radical Pedagogy* 6.1.  
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## **Abstract**

This essay explores undergraduate exposure to alternative ways of knowing. At issue is whether undergraduate students are encouraged to analyze and challenge fundamental underlying premises, assumptions and beliefs of their discipline. Given the ongoing methodological debates within the social sciences, particularly concerning neo-positivists and interpretivists, the thrust of the current project is to suggest that the instruction of introductory research methods courses should offer students an opportunity to explore underlying premises, assumptions and beliefs related to such courses to ensure that a deeper sort of learning occurs. It is further argued that greater exploration of the divide between neo-positivists' and interpretivists' methods of inquiry in the social sciences is essential to provide students with a broader perspective for social analysis. This essay analyzes five, widely used introductory research methods texts in the social sciences. It is concluded that, with rare exception, the five selected textbooks provide students with little or no analysis of underlying assumptions and beliefs that form the ideological presuppositions of disciplines in the social sciences.

## **Disciplines**

Sociology

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## Navigating the Hidden Assumptions of the Introductory Research Methods Text

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### Abstract

This essay explores undergraduate exposure to alternative ways of knowing. At issue is whether undergraduate students are encouraged to analyze and challenge fundamental underlying premises, assumptions and beliefs of their discipline. Given the ongoing methodological debates within the social sciences, particularly concerning neo-positivists and interpretivists, the thrust of the current project is to suggest that the instruction of introductory research methods courses should offer students an opportunity to explore underlying premises, assumptions and beliefs related to such courses to ensure that a deeper sort of learning occurs. It is further argued that greater exploration of the divide between neo-positivists' and interpretivists' methods of inquiry in the social sciences is essential to provide students with a broader perspective for social analysis. This essay analyzes five, widely used introductory research methods texts in the social sciences. It is concluded that, with rare exception, the five selected textbooks provide students with little or no analysis of underlying assumptions and beliefs that form the ideological presuppositions of disciplines in the social sciences.

### The Problem of Unexamined Premises and Assumptions

One of the greatest challenges for an instructor in any discipline is asking students to critically engage the fundamental belief system operating beneath the surface of that discipline. Each discipline requires a set of base conceptual premises which itself presumes no *priori* logic or empirical evidence, and without which no analysis would be possible. For instance, the tenuous foundation of logical positivism continues to exert an enormous influence in the introduction of undergraduates to the physical sciences. This influence continues despite the fact that basic premises of logical positivism have been well disputed for several decades (Whorf, 1964; Winch, 1958; Polanyi, 1958; Feyerabend, 1978). As Thomas Schwandt (1990) has framed the issue:

"[Today] we are thinking about and conducting our inquiries in a zeitgeist that is characterized by a general rejection of the logical positivists' or logical empiricists' program of inquiry. For at least the past 25 years, discussions of methodology in the

natural and social sciences have been dominated by criticisms of that program by formulations of alternative views of the nature of scientific inquiry. To be aware of current conceptions of inquiry in both the social and the physical disciplines is to understand that there is no indisputable foundation for knowledge” (p. 259).

The exploration of a discipline’s base premises and assumptions points to the inherently subjective nature of academic inquiry. Whether one’s understanding of social phenomena is framed within a neo-positivist’s shell or it incorporates Wittgenstein’s language games (1978), such a decision is really a subjective one. There are no objective, truth standards responsible for one’s decision-making in such matters but for ideology. In matters of truth, however, the image of ideology is that of a sinister figure. It is largely for this reason that, at the undergraduate level, discussion of underlying conceptual frameworks across the disciplines remain obscure if not wholly absent.

Academia has traditionally housed social science disciplines in one of three broad branches—the humanities, physical and social sciences. Each of these disciplines is thought to explore its distinct subject matter through a unique method of inquiry. Inherent in hermeneutics, the humanities form aspects of creative human expression through, for example, music, the arts and literature using varying interpretive methods. The physical sciences study the natural world and rely upon scientific methods with neo-positivists’ roots. The social sciences study the social world (i.e., forms of human interaction and individual behavior).

Of the three branches, the social sciences arguably offer the best opportunity for addressing fundamental belief systems. Research methods remain a point of strong contention across the social sciences, with some researchers opting for primarily interpretivists’ approaches and others preferring narrowly positivists’ methods (Guba, 1990; Abbott, 2001; Greene, 1990; Schwandt, 1990; Ragin, 1992). In addition, the introductory research methods course is generally required for all undergraduate social science majors. It is in such a course that students are in a position to explore conceptual premises and assumptions that shape the formulation of any discipline’s knowledge bases.

For this reason, an introductory research methods course in the social sciences offers a unique opportunity for students to have exposure to underlying conceptual frameworks and assumptions of current approaches to social analysis and interpretation. This essay analyzes the treatment of underlying premises, assumptions and beliefs in five, widely-used introductory methods textbooks. I have selected the following five texts for analytical purposes. In many ways, my approach comes across as a review of the appropriateness of these texts.

- Adler, Emily S. and Roger Clark (1999). *How It’s Done: An Invitation to Social Research*. Belmont, CA:Wadsworth.
- Babbie, Earl (2001). *The Practice of Social Research*. 9th Edition. Belmont, CA:Worth Publishers.
- Frankfort-Nachmias, Chava and David Nachmias (2000). *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. 6th Edition. New York:Wadsworth.
- Neuman, W. Lawrence (1999). *Social Research Methods*. 4th Edition. Needham Heights, MA:Allyn & Bacon.
- Schutt, Russell (1999). *Investigating the Social World*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA:Pine Forge.

The criteria for selecting the textbooks above were adopted from Judkins and Hand

(1995). The authors cite four inclusion criteria for selecting research methods texts for their study. (1) Texts had to be comprehensive in scope, (2) written by and directed primarily at social scientists, (3) published after 1990 and (4) must primarily address the undergraduate research methods course. The third criteria has been modified for this study. Only texts with editions that were first published after 1996 are considered.

### **The Instrumentalist Approach of the Introductory Research Methods Text**

The fundamental argument offered here is two-fold. First, it is contended that the introductory research methods course in the social sciences provides the best opportunity for students to explore the underlying premises and assumptions of a discipline. Second, it is suggested that given the central role of standard textbooks in such courses one measure of how such courses engage their premises and assumptions is to analyze the content of the texts. As discussed below, however, the primary emphasis of such texts is to equip students with an extensive set of tools and procedures for conducting investigation, which may not show deeper conceptual understanding. In terms of research methods, at least, the texts adopt a distinctly narrow and instrumental approach to student learning.

In the social sciences, most introductory textbooks submit to the use of the language of the "scientific method of inquiry." Could this language be a myth? Or could it represent a popular dominant ideology? Popular myth holds that the primary distinguishing features of the scientific method are objectivity and neutrality. This certainly represents the dominant ideology of the scientific community, however, the meaning and implications of these central tenets need to be explicitly addressed. Students must be exposed to competing perspectives, such as those suggesting that the selection and use of research tools is an inherently value-laden exercise. Part of the rationale for raising such issues is to make students aware, early in their academic lives, of the tenuous bases for the dominant social ideology that is premised upon there being certain, irrefutable truths out there waiting to be discovered.

Exposure to competing perspectives encourages students to reflect upon the built-in premises and assumptions of the research tools to which they are introduced. Unfortunately, introductory research methods texts generally view consideration of such issues as taking time away from the primary instrumentalist task of training students in the use of tools. As a result, there is a tendency for introductory research methods texts to place their emphasis on the mastery of certain research tools (e.g., surveys, sampling techniques, participant observation designs, true experiments). In such cases, student expectations concern the extent to which they are able to demonstrate an understanding of, and competently apply, such tools in a given social context. The tools used in social investigation are treated as objective instruments without critical scrutiny of their premises and assumptions.

It is relevant to note that most research methods texts reduce underlying premises and assumptions of social science inquiry to a contrast between positivism and interpretivism. This argument can be seen in delineations in subsections of chapters where either positivism or the other is reified; or that the two concepts are unnecessarily pitted against each other. To provide students with a healthier appraisal of understanding social science inquiry, it would be helpful instead for such textbooks to offer meaningful interpretation of research processes relative to their basic assumptions and premises. Positivism assumes, for example, that the social world exists external to the investigator, and is thus waiting to be discovered. It is

expected that the manner of investigation can then impact only how well the investigator perceives the world. "The term *positivism* has generally represented the belief in a logically ordered, objective reality that we can come to know better and better through science" (Babbie, 2001, p. 51). Interpretivism assumes that the social world does not have an existence separate from the investigator and that it is the manner by which the investigator interprets the social world that determines reality.

Positivists' and interpretivists' commonly recognize that an investigator may affect subjects of a research investigation. The difference between the two ideological perspectives is that positivists' believe that there are deliberate steps for researchers to control investigators' interferences, other potential contaminants, and confounding variables among others. On the other hand, interpretivists' respond with the view that efforts toward such objectivity are illusionary at best. Indeed, interpretivists' maintain that such interference is not limited to physical/social interaction (or other disturbances of the social "reality"). Such interference begins with the construction of the original research question: "In the view of (interpretivist), scientists construct an image of reality that reflects their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others" (Schutt, 1999, p. 393).

### **Ideology and the Introductory Research Methods Text**

Among the authors considered here, Babbie (2001) is one that devotes greatest amount of attention to the underlying premises and assumptions of social science research. Babbie divides ways of knowing into three categories—premodern, modern and postmodern. Pre-modernism refers to a crude, unreflective mindset associated with pre-Enlightenment, religious superstition (essentially Comte's theological stage). Modernism is the recognition that different subjective perspectives yield divergent understandings of social reality. Given the proper tools and procedures, there is the belief that such subjectivity can ultimately be translated into objectivity. Postmodernism, analogous to interpretivism, argues that there is no underlying "true" reality. Rather, reality is constructed by the manner in which individuals interact with one another and with the material world.

The author treats this subject early in the text (Chapter 1, "Human Inquiry and Science") and provides a brief but engaging discussion of the issues. In later discussions of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and feminist paradigms (in Chapter 2, "Paradigms, Theory and Social Research") these issues are raised though they are not explicitly addressed in the framework of pre-modern, modern and postmodern interpretations. To some extent this is a missed opportunity to integrate the theme of competing perspectives more fully into the text.

For Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, underlying premises and assumptions are subsumed within a discussion of the scientific method (chapter one, "The Scientific Approach"). This discussion, organized around six core assumptions of the scientific method, is useful in providing a basic introduction to positivists' foundation of scientific method. However, it is not explicitly presented. Positivism is simply assumed to be the dominant, foundational perspective rather than being overtly introduced. This is further complicated by the authors' reference to the dynamic tensions between positivism and interpretivism. "Those who follow the interpretive approach realize that not only is their subject matter different, but because of this difference, the credibility of the findings and the explanatory principles they propose is considered to be less than that attributed to the natural sciences" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000, p. 11).

Despite the depth of insight to which this observation could lead, the authors offer only two paragraphs for its consideration. Given the fact that many pages are dedicated to positivists' interpretation of scientific research methods, this point is especially significant. The problem with such an approach is not the imbalance itself but the authors' failure to more explicitly address the nature of the conflict. This oversight is especially problematic given the centrality the authors' later claim for the *verstehen* tradition within qualitative methods. "Qualitative research, as a method of data collection and analysis, derives from the *Verstehen* tradition" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000, p. 256).

Interestingly, Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2000) offer one of the few texts introducing this key interpretivist concept. The authors identify three "aims of science"—scientific explanation, prediction and understanding (or *verstehen*). Aside from Neuman, this is the only substantive treatment of the *verstehen* tradition by any of the authors considered here. Babbie briefly discusses *verstehen* in reference to Weber's historical studies of world religions. However, in the sole chapter dedicated to qualitative methods the author inexplicitly forgoes the subject.

The approach of Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias raises the issue of whether distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods somehow parallel differences between positivism and interpretivism. Some, such as Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, suggest that positivism is the proper perspective for quantitative methods while interpretivism belongs to the realm of qualitative methods. Others, such as Schutt (1999), argue with equal vigor that positivism is no less appropriate for qualitative methods than for quantitative methods and that such divisions are without merit. It is typical for social science methods texts to make the claim that different conceptual framework and research methods produce different research outcomes, without discussing explicitly sharp differences important to assumptions and premises supporting such methods. For example, it might be argued that urban voting patterns lend themselves to standard survey studies (grounded in positivism) because the act of voting and how one casts his/her votes is an objective process with sufficient universal meaning. However, it is further argued that drug addiction among Haitian immigrants lends itself to field research studies (grounded in interpretivism) because working with this population and their contexts often requires multiple, subjective meanings and overlapping social contexts to be interpreted. Such distinctions often lead to confusing dichotomies between explanatory (quantitative) versus descriptive (qualitative) studies.

In this regard, Neuman's text (1999) is unique among those considered here. Whereas the other texts relegate qualitative methods to a single chapter or two, Neuman attempts to discuss quantitative and qualitative methods in a parallel fashion throughout the text. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the author dedicates a considerable number of pages to underlying premises and assumptions—in fact, taking up the entirety of Chapter 4 in his textbook. The contrast between positivism and interpretivism is presented as a distinction among "positivists," "interpretivists" and "critical" social science. Neuman's discussion of positivism mirrors that of Babbie (2001) and Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2000), though the author details greater variation among positivists (including logical empiricism, postpositivism, naturalism, the covering law model and behaviorism). Interpretive social sciences are traced to Weber (1978) and Dilthey (2002) with a rare, sustained treatment of meaning and social action along with the hermeneutics tradition.

Neuman's presentation of "critical" social science is slightly confusing insofar as he distinguishes it less by a distinct methodological orientation, and more by the subject

matter of practitioners (principally neo-marxist treatments of social and class conflict). "Critical researchers differ from the others less in the research techniques they use than in how they approach a research problem" (Neuman, 1999, pp. 81-82). The strengths of the author's approach are, first, the extent to which underlying conceptual issues are raised as a substantive concern in the context of introductory research methods and, second, his genuine effort to weave such issues into the fabric of the text as a whole.

By way of sharp contrast, beyond a one-paragraph mention of objectivity and inter-subjective agreement couched in a discussion of the scientific method, Adler and Clark offer no explicit discussion of underlying conceptual assumptions (Adler & Clark, 1999, p. 7). Schutt (1999), on the other hand, dedicates four pages to a discussion of positivism versus interpretivism, though this is tucked away somewhat obscurely at the end of the tenth chapter. Like Neuman, Schutt (1999) adds important nuance to positivists' perspective, distinguishing between traditional positivism and post-positivism: "Post-positivism accepts the basic premise that there is an external, objective reality, but recognizes that its complexity, and the limitations of human observers, preclude us from developing anything more than a partial understanding" (p. 392). For Schutt, the goal of science from the post-positivist's perspective is to achieve inter-subjective agreement to the highest degree possible regarding the nature of reality.

Following a rudimentary treatment of interpretivism, Schutt (1999) makes his own position clear: "I should point out that this entire book reflects the post-positivist's perspective that I and most social scientists share" (p. 394). This is a rare and commendable moment of candor. The author acknowledges both that he works within a specific ideological tradition and that this tradition has significantly shaped his presentation of the material in the text. Furthermore, for those who would argue that the division between positivism and interpretivism is somehow correlated with the division between quantitative and qualitative methods, the author offers a useful corrective. While the balance of his text addresses quantitative methods, it is noteworthy that a large number of the studies cited by Schutt represent qualitative studies derived from the author's own research, and they reflect his post-positivist's perspective.

## Conclusion

The intellectual honesty of Schutt is highly instructive. While positivism may be the predominant perspective of sociologists, it is pedagogically dishonest to build such a perspective into a text without explicitly addressing the consequences. It is agreed that research methods are essential for the social sciences, and that this should be introduced early in the life of the social science student, precisely because they impact the study of other courses. As Bridges et. al. (1998) have commented,

"[S]tudents may postpone required statistics or methods courses (due to anxiety) until the very end of their academic careers. This practice can create significant problems for their performance in other courses—often students who have postponed completion of statistics or methods courses are unable to grasp the quantitative material assigned in upper-division classes" (p. 15).

It is, therefore, imperative that the content of introductory methods texts include an open and extensive discussion of positivism and interpretivism—both for the research methods course itself as well as for the study of other social science subjects.



From the above, I argue that the movement of neo-positivism represents a dominant force in relation to other ideological perspectives. Since the dominance of neo-positivism overshadows all other ideological bents in the social sciences, many students complete their undergraduate education unaware of the existence of other competing ideological perspectives. It is, therefore, important for educators to begin to shift the focus away from conducting social science research from technical proficiency to a conceptual and basic understanding of research techniques and to explain to students implications of engaging in research from this alternative perspective.

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