

Joanna Rak

Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0505-3684>

e-mail: joanna.rak@amu.edu.pl

Handbook of Social Science Methodology for Students and Course Instructors¹

Book review: Dawn Brancati, *Social Scientific Research*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne 2018, pp. 384.

Social Scientific Research is a comprehensive, readable, and well-planned introduction to designing research in social sciences. Each chapter commences with a list of objectives and contains a summary of key points and suggestions for further reading. Chapters end with exercises that, on the one hand, allow students to practice research skills. On the other hand, these practical tasks may be especially useful during classes about designing social science research. They fit a course instructor with ideas for educational activities that will enrich their teaching. Since the author discusses numerous examples to elucidate the main research procedures, the methodological guideline is plausibly illustrated.

The volume consists of six parts. Part I focuses on approaching social sciences research in methodological, ontological, and epistemological terms. Chapter 1 rests upon the assumption that the quest for human behavior understanding distinguishes social sciences from other branches of science. Fledgling researchers and students will appreciate that at the very beginning of the discussion on social sciences, Brancati challenges the extent to which human behavior may be observable, identifiable, consistent, predictable, measurable, and

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testable. The author skillfully calls into question the exploratory and explanatory power of the scientific method but also encourages readers to put analytical effort into generating rewarding results. This is a sound introduction to social sciences that warns students off discouragement arising from imperfect measurement beforehand, just in time. Chapter 2 considers research ethics by addressing not only outright frauds but also moral dilemmas stemming from human subjects' protection from physical and psychological harm, research transparency, the peer review process, and credit sharing (p. 27). It offers a useful checklist for researchers describing ethical issues for their research grant descriptions.

Chapter 3 shows how to formulate appropriately a research problem that challenges conventional views, is topical, relevant to many people, and carries considerable implications (p. 33). Brancati pays attention to being aware of what particular contributions a given study makes to what fields. According to the author, a contribution may be theoretical, empirical, or both. While the former refers to the explanation formulated for a research question, the latter relates to the evidence provided in support of this explanation (p. 38). Nevertheless, the overview misses the option for a methodological contribution that may draw upon designing new techniques, tools, research procedures, or their modification. Furthermore, Brancati does little to debunk a widely held myth that a study is groundbreaking when its author is the first to apply a given conceptual framework, tool, or approach to explore a particular research field or the first at all to analyze some beings, processes or phenomena.

However, Brancati does dispel the myth that literature review should cover the whole literature on a subject. Instead, the author argues that reviews ought to be purpose-driven and functional with regard to research. Chapter 4 offers a basic guide on constructing a literature review functional in terms of solving research problems. Nonetheless, readers interested in details of composing reviews should extend to further reading.

Part II sheds light on practical aspects of advancing causal arguments. Chapter 5 locates conceptual frameworks within a research process. This is a concise and highly useful checklist for those who design and verify the correctness of concepts that apply to theoretical and methodological assumptions. Chapter 6 deals with the types of causal relationships and difficulties that often occur during their establishment: spuriousness, tautologies, and reverse causation.

Then, Part III goes on to provide means of collecting data and solving research problems. Chapter 7 advises how to choose between qualitative and quantitative approaches to establish an effective way of achieving research goals. Students will find useful the description of the utility of data attributes (large-N, objectivity, randomization, and transparency) for research: hypothesis building, hypothesis testing, generalizability, causal inference, and replicability (p. 101). Mixed approaches are the object of Chapter 8. Brancati presents mixed methods research designs and discusses the purposes of their employment (p. 112). Chapter 9 addresses the criteria for case selection. The author aptly introduces dilemmas about the number of cases scrutinized in theory building and theory testing, the depth and comprehensiveness of arguments, and generalizability (p. 133).

While Part IV delves into qualitative approaches, Part V tackles quantitative ones. Importantly, Brancati weighs up the advantages and disadvantages of the use of particular techniques. The remarks on their characteristics and numerous examples may facilitate designing research by less experienced researchers. Chapters 10–14 give details of conducting individual interviews, group interviews, participant observation, single case-study (process tracing), and multi-case study (comparative case study method). In Chapters 15 and 16, the author provides introductory remarks on quantitative data by covering the criteria for evaluating measures and features of quantitative data. The last chapters address quantitative methods, content analysis, surveys, experiments, and observational studies.

Part VI lists practical tips on how to write publishable academic papers. Brancati shares with readers how to formulate any title in academic work, write acknowledgments, construct abstracts, structure articles, and their sections. At the end of the book, readers find a glossary that summarizes terms and categories relevant to a research process.

Summing up, the handbook may be a fruitful reading for undergraduate students that face the challenge of designing their research and write academic reports. Importantly, Brancati is open about dilemmas and difficulties that may limit research results and thus our understating of human behavior. Simultaneously, the author offers methods, techniques, and tools that will allow students to make an informed contribution to social sciences. Finally, those researchers who seek to review their own current approaches to a research process will consider this book refreshing.