Book Review/Compte rendu

Richard Biernacki, *Reinventing Evidence in Social Inquiry: Decoding Facts and Variables*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 199 pp. $30.00 paper (978-1-137-00727-8).

A social methods course is a mandatory degree requirement for college and university students studying sociology; oftentimes, it is a class that students bemoan, temporarily endure, and, upon completion, quickly push from their minds. Biernacki approaches the topic of social inquiry in an interesting, dynamic way while offering a timely, if controversial, rethinking of current sociological methodology.

In *Reinventing Evidence in Social Inquiry*, Biernacki contends that sociocultural coding does not generate empirical facts; rather, coding is a ritual practice that misguidedly converts "regenerating meanings into an isolated token, a datum label" (p. 11). Biernacki challenges how sociology has come to think about systematized coding and the generation of "facts." Using a positivist perspective to interpret texts measures attributes that "cannot leave intact the system-like relations that let us generate meaning from a text" (p. 137). Throughout the text, Biernacki offers several concrete examples of what he calls the superficiality of social scientific coding processes. Biernacki's problematizes the positivistic, analytical nature of social scientific coding, instead advocating for a more hermeneutical, interpretive approach. Biernacki states that he has "mocked the pretensions of a cross-dressing social 'science,' not those of conventional natural science, whose clothing sociologists try to wear as their own by presenting 'large-N' coding results" (p. 154). Social scientists should understand that decontextualized fragments of text have no meaning separate from the surrounding text — and that texts have no meaning separate from the cultural milieu in which they were produced. Biernacki emphasizes that interpretive approaches are better suited than analytical techniques to the understanding of textual and cultural evidence.

Organized into five chapters, the text begins by problematizing the use of positivist methods in sociocultural inquiry, specifically, the protocols of natural sciences that "authorize coders to isolate facts from their individually meaningful contexts and then throw these bits into an independent diagram that challenges our imagination" (p. 3). Biernacki argues that social scientists engage in a ritual process of coding, whereby

they misguidedly transform scientifically gathered "facts" into sociological "ultimate meanings." The term ritual is used in a Durkheimian sense, describing a "distinct mode of communication and performance that reconfirms timeless models by which people can regenerate their social relations or professional roles" (p. 10).

In Chapter 1, Biernacki argues that social scientific coding is the incarnation of a ritual, not a systematized, scientific procedure. This ritual is akin to "fitting the world to a condensed map rather than examining the world to see if the map represents anything" (p. 151). The decontextualization and selective recontextualization of meaning reinforces preexisting ideas under the guise of employing empirical foundations. These sociocultural coding rituals purport to be "scientific," but are, in actuality, less rigorous than humanist approaches that acknowledge the limitations of induction. Humanist approaches acknowledge the "gift of an acute trial, the insurance of shared documentation, and the transformative power of anomalies" (p. 3).

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, Biernacki offers his reanalysis of three prominent works in cultural sociology, including Bearman and Stovel's "Becoming a Nazi"; Evans' "Playing God"; and Griswold's "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretations in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies." Biernacki recreates these theses by checking their text samples — what Biernacki calls the "raw materials" or unanalyzed data — and comparing the data against the published results. In his reanalysis, Biernacki demonstrates that different sociologists are able to take the same data and elaborate different models and stories that might fit the data equally well. Biernacki argues that "reading documents is fraught with too many choices to produce 'facts'" (p. 8). The ritual process of coding — the ways in which an analyst breaks down data into themes, words, or connections — is interpretive, not empiricist. There is not one, ultimate meaning that can be derived from any data set. Despite employing "scientific" modes of inquiry, the models and results that these studies create are irreproducible because the ritual of coding does not produce a singular meaning. Biernacki argues that, "the researchers … conjure a predestined function of writing that warrants reductive coding for core social meanings" (p. 138). According to Biernacki, these authors analyze their data without understanding the context of the data, privileging the social without looking at the textual context. However, without a response from the authors whose works Biernacki replicated, the readers are made to rely solely on Biernacki's critique.

In Chapter 5, Biernacki concludes that applying positivist approaches to humanistic data produces unreliable, decontextualized, and opaque models. Codes should not, as he states, "replace and speak *for* the texts"

(p. 147). The sociocultural preoccupation with being "scientific" forces researchers to "efface the telltale detail in favor of assigning general labels to atomized 'facts'" (p. 154). Therefore, Biernacki proposes a return to Weber's ideal type to highlight unified analytic constructs and concrete individual phenomena. It is necessary to "verify the transposition of schemas as constellations, and in turn these schemas integrate a culture or a process of change into an intelligible whole" (p. 154). Biernacki concludes with a quotation by Robert Musil who wrote, "every case on which thoughtful investigators land 'has the ability to overturn everything that people had up to then believed'" (p. 155).

Biernacki's critique especially resonates with individuals in the social sciences who are often subject to the tensions between scientific and humanist approaches. The book's dense prose might make it a difficult read for an undergraduate course, but graduate-level methodologists would greatly benefit from his critique. Biernacki challenges his audience to become "thoughtful investigators" and critically engage with their own methodological practices.

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