

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Glenn Firebaugh**, *Seven Rules for Social Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2008. 272 pages. \$US 24.95 paper (978-0-691-13567-0), \$US 65.00 hard-cover (978-0-691-12546-6)

**T**raining students how to do competent academic research is a primary goal of graduate studies. Unfortunately, sociology PhD graduates are often ill prepared to carry out research to a high standard or even to evaluate the research of others. Regardless of the reasons for it, there simply isn't enough emphasis on providing students with a wide range of appropriate skills. While we typically provide them with courses in specific types of methods, there is little emphasis on more basic research fundamentals such as how to choose a good research question, how to choose the appropriate methods of analysis, and how to clearly and convincingly report our findings so that they catch the interest of other sociologists. Glen Firebaugh does an outstanding job of tackling these issues in *Seven Rules for Social Research*.

The book results from Firebaugh's many years of experience teaching research methods courses to sociology graduate students. As the title suggests, the book is organized into seven chapters, each representing a "rule" of social research. In no other book have I seen such a good description of the complete research process, so accessible to graduate students, regardless of their methodological strengths. This is a book that every graduate student in sociology should read. Although primarily geared towards quantitative methods, it is certainly also relevant to those who do qualitative research.

All of the chapters end with a section containing several excellent student exercises. Some of these questions require using freely available empirical data (e.g., the US General Social Survey, the American National Election Study), and others are more theoretical in content. The questions requiring analysis are also divided according to level of statistical knowledge. Of course, the student exercises would be particularly useful in quantitative methods courses, but again, they would also be useful for qualitative researchers if only to help them understand some of the pitfalls of quantitative research that they may need to read.

The first chapter, which discusses the rule of "There should be the possibility of surprise in social research," guides students on how to

choose a good research question. Firebaugh's concern is the common problem of students choosing a research question based solely on the fact that it interests them, regardless of whether anyone else would care. The chapter stresses the importance of developing research questions that tie into existing debates of interest to other sociologists. Through insightful examples, the Firebaugh also stresses the importance of choosing research questions that are answerable. In other words, he stresses that many questions of interest to sociologists simply cannot be adequately answered with the data and methods we presently have (or will ever have, for that matter), so we should try to limit the amount of time we spend pondering such questions.

The second chapter stresses the importance of looking for differences that matter. Too often, as Firebaugh acknowledges, quantitative sociological research is plagued by claims that effects are important simply because they are statistically significant. Of course statistical significance is important, but not on its own. Firebaugh provides interesting examples of real research where statistical significance suggests an effect, but the effect is not very meaningful in substantive terms simply because it is not very large. Firebaugh stresses the importance of being guided by theory when determining if an effect is meaningful. He also discusses the importance of clearly reporting and illustrating the size of effects and relationships using other information (e.g., graphs of fitted values, comparison of groups) rather than simply by looking at regression output alone.

The four middle chapters are of most interest to quantitative researchers, though again qualitative researchers could also benefit from reading them. Chapters 3 and 4 tackle issues such as incorporating several "reality checks" in the research design and the importance of replication to ensure observed findings are meaningful. Chapters 5 and 6 do an excellent job of discussing various methods and data for testing particular types of research questions.

The book ends with Firebaugh's seventh rule, "Let Method Be the Servant, Not the Master." It is here that Firebaugh again speaks to both quantitative and qualitative researchers. Too often sociologists chose questions that fit their preferred method rather than employ methods appropriate for their chosen questions. Even more problematic is that fact that limitations in knowledge often prevent researchers from employing the appropriate methods to answer a particular question and data. Firebaugh stresses that despite increased sophistication of methods and estimation techniques over the past couple of decades, researchers should not rely on these methods as "substitutes for careful theorizing and conceptualization." He is also careful to point out that methods should not

be an afterthought — data design and estimation methods should go hand in hand.

In summary, this book is insightful and clearly written. I have no noteworthy criticisms. I suppose one could argue that it reads a bit too much like a set of lectures for a methods course, but given its target audience — graduate students — I don't see that as problematic. In fact, Firebaugh has provided us with an important resource to help guide students through their graduate studies. The general lesson of the book is summarized by its final sentence, "Above all what we need in social research today is more imagination" (p. 235). Simply put, this is an excellent book that I highly recommend for graduate courses in methods and methods comprehensive exam reading lists. All of our graduate students could benefit from reading it.

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