Kelvin Low is currently on leave from his teaching assistantship at the National University of Singapore. He is pursuing a PhD in the Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld. His research interests include social memory and historiography, sociology of the senses, migration and transnationalism, and sociology of everyday life.

Address: Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, AS1 #03-06, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570. [email: socleyk@nus.edu.sg]


keywords: logic of discovery • qualitative methods • research conceptualization

Although essentially methods and methodology, this book is surprisingly compelling. Writing in a very personal manner by sharing her own successes and failures as a social researcher, Luker turns topics that are usually dry and unexciting into captivating discussions to such an extent that it is hard to put the book down. Basically, salsa dancing refers to the iterative process involved in doing research that focuses on discovery and not verification. These processes are similar to salsa dance steps. The author also recommends that researchers go salsa dancing (or running and other physical activities that increase heart rates and take our minds off academic work) to clear our heads when we are stuck. The title ‘salsa dancing’ may mislead potential readers to dismiss the book as not being academic enough. They would be wrong. It contains invaluable guidance, advice and suggestions. Also, the style of writing is so empowering that many a graduate student and young academic searching for alternatives to dominant hypothesis testing methods for conducting research will find it a gem.

The first two chapters of the book orientate the reader to ‘Salsa Dancing’ social science as a paradigm for conceptualization and method in conducting social research that avoids the pitfalls of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although trained as a demographer, Luker quickly noticed the limitations of quantitative methods. She questions the dominant view that defines rigorous social science as the use of mathematical abstractions, with nothing being taken to be meaningful unless it is statistically significant. Highlighting the historical background and political agenda closely linked to the development of survey technology in social science, Luker cautions against the blind worship of this method. In her words:

The Great Depression in the United States created incentives for the government to measure and assess both the damage wrought by the Depression and, more important, the public response to it . . . it is clearly in the interest of elected leaders to be apprised of and familiar with the kinds of political and social upheavals that will change the way voters look at the world. . . . The rise of the attitude surveys in the 1930s created a technology with which to do this. (pp. 27–8)
Another shortcoming of the logic-of-verification methods is that the questions one can ask are limited to the kind with relatively clear answers. Quantitative researchers are basically looking for the distribution of a population among the already specified answers.

On the other hand, nor are qualitative methods innocent of association with a political agenda, though to a much lesser extent. The weaknesses of traditional qualitative methods, in Luker’s view, are their inability to harness their good writing and story telling abilities to building a cumulative body of theory. At best, they only build ‘middle range theories’. Rarely do qualitative researchers see their task as primarily one of building theory. Many undertake a study in order to answer a question. Therefore, Luker claims that these two traditions leave aspiring researchers somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea (p. 37).

Luker’s goal in this book is to help researchers take the strengths from both traditions in doing qualitative research. Her conviction is that salsa dancing qualitative researchers should approach their work in a spirit of expectancy, informed by theories they want to contribute to. Instead of verifying a narrow hypothesis derived from an existing theory, the salsa dancing way of doing research aims at elucidation and not verification. It is holistic and attentive to context, conceptually innovative, socially embedded and strongly committed to building theory and deeply attentive to questions of power.

From Chapters 3 to 6, Luker uses her ‘bilingual’ (quantitative and qualitative) competence to help qualitative researchers navigate the social science world where quantitative methods reign. Her advice on how to slide intelligently into ongoing communications in academic journals is especially helpful for qualitative researchers on the usually arduous road towards publishing their work.

In her opinion, the three golden rules faithfully adhered to by quantitative researchers, namely sampling, operationalization and generalization, are also good practices that salsa dancing researchers should borrow but use in a very different fashion. Instead of a systematic random probability sample that aims to generalize, salsa dancing researchers’ concern in sampling is to find a case or set of cases that is reasonably representative of the larger phenomenon (not larger population). This can be done through finding a setting where the variable that the qualitative researcher is trying to explain varies. Also, instead of proving that the sample is statistically representative, salsa dancing researchers should logically show how the sample resembles people elsewhere and the theoretical grounds for this. Operationalization of variables is not done by well-defined categories from the outset, but is instead an ongoing process. The researcher’s task in operationalization is to solicit and analyse how research participants think about the variables. As for generalization, Luker urges salsa dancing researchers to bump up their study to a level of abstraction that provides theoretical insights. Not only will this ensure that a wide range of colleagues would want to read the book, it is a form of generality that differs from that of quantitative study.

From Chapters 7 to 10, the book deals with the down-to-earth nitty-gritty of salsa dance research practice. One useful technique of qualitative data reduction and analysis recommended in the book is the Qualitative Comparative
Analysis (QCA) first developed by Charles Ragin (1987), a historical comparativist. According to Luker, this method can aid the salsa dancing researcher in discovering non-linear patterns in social life. Although similar to grounded theory in its inductive approach, it can be applied to larger structures. I have to congratulate Luker for bringing in a breath of fresh air into qualitative data analysis. Fingerman and Bermann (2000) believe that using models or ideas from other disciplines and intellectual arenas is a time-honoured and frequently fruitful strategy for shedding new light on one’s own field of endeavour. For instance, sociologists such as Erving Goffman have employed dramaturgy to understand social interaction. More recently, cognitive psychologists have applied computer models in studying artificial intelligence as a means of understanding decision-making.

In my opinion, the frame of mind, attitude and orientation in doing salsa dancing social research advocated in this book is very much needed in places outside North America, notably mainland China. Social research is a relatively young discipline in China (Yuen-Tsang and Wang, 2002), as it was only reinstated in Chinese universities fewer than three decades ago. Chinese researchers have quickly emulated the quantitative, hypothesis-testing endeavours that have dominated the western social science world. This trend is especially obvious in my own field of research concerning parenting and childrearing in China. Critiques challenge the prevalence of western concepts and measures that do not address the unique forces acting on Chinese families and fail to capture distinctive elements of Chinese childrearing practices (Peterson et al., 2004; Tardif and Miao, 2000). Conducting social research that examines in depth the social phenomenon that is social and culturally embedded and hence develops indigenous theories before launching into hypothesis testing is an urgent task. The guidance and suggestions given in this book will be helpful in challenging Chinese social researchers in their tendency to indiscriminately test western theories. The limitation of this book that I can see at this point of time is its language. If it were translated into Chinese, it would be a helpful resource for social researchers in China. Finally, the four appendices at the end of the book deserve attention as they are practical tips for researchers who wish to venture into the logic of discovery in doing social science.

References


Esther Goh Chor Leng did her PhD research work on mainland China. Her dissertation was an ethnographic study on the dynamics between ‘only children’ and their multiple caregivers in three generational families in Xiamen. A qualitative social researcher, her research interests include children, families, parenting, migrant children, drug addiction and rehabilitation.

Address: AS3 Level 4, Department of Social Work, 3 Arts Link, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117570. [email: swkegcl@nus.edu.sg]


Keywords: Barcelona ♦ Manchester ♦ sensual city ♦ sensuous experience ♦ Spain ♦ UK ♦ urban renewal ♦ urban sociology

This book pays tribute to the environmental experience of people in cities: those who obtain knowledge through their body senses, who feel their surroundings and their place in it as a wide-ranging corporeal fabric that integrates the simultaneous impressions of viewing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, moving, encountering material objects and signs and interacting with other people. In this book, Mónica Montserrat Degen, a cultural sociologist, explores this urban experience among people – residents and visitors – who move through the regenerated ‘publicness’ in the streets of two renewed European neighbourhoods: El Raval in Barcelona and Castlefield in Manchester.

The book comprises two parts. In the first, Degen offers theoretical considerations of urban life that support her idea of the sensuous body. She starts with Lefebvre’s (1991) triad of the lived, perceived and conceived space and combines the physical, social and political dimensions of places in order to capture the multiplicity that characterizes each (Massey, 2005). She moves on to discuss the significance and ascendancy of the visual dimension central to urban design and aesthetics, and points to its fabrication at the intersection of the powerful global economy and the local, often reinvented, traditional individuality, and how it redefines and facilitates an ‘improved’ publicness. However, Degen calls attention to the importance of other senses, which, although embedded in the visibility of a specific physical environment and its perception, are by no means less significant to the way people effectively read their environment. In particular she attempts to capture the notion of a place’s ‘ambiance’. Often, she claims, this ‘ambiance’ is almost as important as the physical location itself (p. 30) and is therefore an environmental feature that is structured, manipulated and resisted in arrays of power relations, mostly economic (e.g. pp. 30–4; 47–50). Degen emphasizes that the senses are not neutral conductors of information, but in themselves are shaped by ideologies, hence attaching different values to the same information that is conveyed bodily. Eventually, the connotations associated with our simultaneous bodily impressions sculpt the meanings we cast onto the urban environment, shape our feelings of comfort and belonging and determine our sense of being. To
At first sight, "salsa dancing into the social sciences" seems an absurd and inappropriate image with little relation to the typical experience of the fieldworker knocking on doors in the rain or snow, or the drone struggling with statistical-analysis software, stacks of questionnaires or the cacophony of rowdy focus groups in a desperate attempt to impose meaning and some order on the.