The idea that science is a blueprint for research and imagination gives research its life and purpose inspired this comprehensive explanation of research methodology. The authors’ decades of experience have revealed that research is a craft requiring judgment and creativity, not simply memorization and application of the rules of science. Whether one is conducting an intimate one-on-one interview or a large-scale examination of an entire society, human imagination and scientific principles of inquiry go hand in hand. To that end, this book emphasizes scientific method but also acknowledges its critics. It covers a wide variety of data collection techniques but presents them as reinforcing, rather than competing with, one another, thus striking a balance between qualitative and quantitative methods. It is designed for students and instructors who want a comprehensive treatment of a variety of research techniques with special emphasis on qualitative approaches.

Professor Paul S. Gray (B.A. Politics, Princeton University; M.A. Education, Stanford University) received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Yale University and has taught at Boston College for thirty-two years. In addition to teaching, Gray also works as a business consultant, specializing in leadership development and corporate citizenship. Gray is the Faculty Chair of the Leadership for Change executive program associated with Boston College’s Carroll School of Management. Gray has conducted research on topics as diverse as higher education in Massachusetts and labor unions in Africa. His research has been published in *Symbolic Interaction*, *Industrial Relations*, and the *Journal of African Studies*.

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The Research Imagination

AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS

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with the collaboration of

Karen Bettez Halnon and James Carritte
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PREFACE

Science is a blueprint for research; imagination gives research its life and purpose.

These ideas have inspired us to write this book about research methods. After decades of experience in planning and carrying out social research projects of all kinds, we are convinced that research is indeed a craft requiring judgment and creativity, not simply learning the rules of science and applying them. Whether one is doing the most intimate one-on-one interviewing or large-scale examinations of how entire societies make public policy, human imagination and scientific principles of inquiry go hand in hand. To that end, this book emphasizes scientific method but also acknowledges its critics. It covers a wide variety of data collection techniques but presents them as reinforcing, rather than competing with, one another.

A Balance between Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

This is a book for students and instructors who want a comprehensive treatment of a variety of research techniques but with special attention to qualitative approaches. We are committed to a balanced approach that gives a variety of qualitative methods full exposure alongside more mainstream quantitative strategies. Joe R. Feagin, a past president of the American Sociological Association, has commented on the almost exclusively quantitative emphasis of articles accepted for publication in leading sociology journals. He has advocated more realism in recognizing the methodological diversity within the discipline. Feagin (1999) also noted that many sociologists who study, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality oppose a heavy emphasis on quantitative social research. In addition, he pointed out that introductory sociology texts generally feature more qualitatively oriented studies because these are likely to be of more interest to students, as well as of immediate moral and practical importance to society.

In this book, we respond to Feagin’s challenge. The separate chapters “Intensive Interviewing,” “Observational Field Research,” “Feminist Research,” and “Historical Analysis” present the many qualitative approaches to data collection. At the same time, The Research Imagination gives ample attention to surveys, content analysis, aggregate data analysis, comparative research, and elementary and more advanced statistics. Throughout the text, the basic themes of scientific principles and human imagination that tie all research together are emphasized and reinforced.

This book is written by sociologists, but it is also appropriate for courses in other fields. Apt examples and student exercises are drawn from education, nursing, and social work. Separate chapters such as “Evaluation Research” and “Indexes and Scales” are applicable to a wide range of disciplines and professions. The Research Imagination is designed as a core text, but it can easily be supplemented with specialized readings on individual methods. Numerous suggestions for additional readings are offered following each chapter.

Responding to the Postmodern Critique

Since the turbulent 1960s, mainstream social investigation, especially experimentation and survey research, has had to contend with a humanistic critique (e.g., Phillips, 1971; Reinhartz, 1984; Bruyn, 1986) that questioned its ability to capture fully the range and variety of human behavior. However, especially in the past twenty years, a new and more controversial genre of
criticism has appeared. There has been a dra-
matic increase in postmodern and feminist
scholarship (Rosenau, 1991; Harding and
Hintikka, 2003; Law, 2004; Alexander, 2005) that
either explicitly or implicitly challenges the very
foundations of positivistic, scientific method:
reliability, validity, objectivity, and represen-
tativeness. Of course, scientific method still
embodies by far the most influential principles
of social research, but we have responded to
the postmodern critique by trying to understand
terms like “objectivity” as less self-evident and
all-encompassing than in the past.

So that students can take something construc-
tive from the debate, The Research Imagina-
tion takes up the task of integrating postmod-
ern methods into the overall examination of the
research process. In colleges and universities all
over the world, conventional canons of relia-
bility and validity are being criticized in meth-
ods courses today; we try to show what these
challenges are, where they originate, and how to
cope with them. We decided not to present the
battle of positivism versus postmodernism as a
contest that seems to have no winner because
the two sides often do not seem to agree on
basic premises. Instead, we use ideas from each
school of thought to comment constructively on
the other – just as we also outline the strengths
and weaknesses of both qualitative fieldwork
and quantitative techniques. Our position is that
positivists would benefit from some reflection
on the impact and meaning of their own research
and that postmodern researchers would do well
to consider the prescriptive nature of, and at
times the paucity of actual data in, their work.

What Is New in the Field?

Both the contemporary evolution of the litera-
ture on the various methods, as well as changes
in the range of topics selected for research
today have influenced the content of this vol-
ume. As new problems and research interests
emerge, there is a shift in the methods that are
best suited to study them as well as a need to
improve existing methods. The methods litera-
ture has evolved to include wholly new elements
such as action research, participatory evalua-
tion research, and narrative analysis. At the same
time, familiar research strategies such as par-
ticipant observation and survey construction
have been influenced by changes in technol-
yogy via e-mail and the World Wide Web. The
Internet telescopes space and time to the point
at which even the definition of “field” work is
changing, from having to travel to a natural
setting to being in the setting virtually via com-
puter. Finally, there has been increased empha-
sis on multimethod approaches in recent years
(Jacobs, 2005). Because this text presents a vari-
ety of qualitative and quantitative methods as
mutually reinforcing, rather than in opposition
to each other, it is ideally suited to projects in
which multiple methods are employed (Brewer
and Hunter, 2006).

Twenty-five years ago the range of examples
employed in methods texts reflected the social
policy issues of the day – problems such as race
relations, poverty, housing, crime, and drugs. Of
course, these interests do remain, but they are
augmented by an increasing emphasis on topics
such as sexuality, aging, homelessness, violence
against women, and child abuse. Methodolog-
ically, studies of children receive more atten-
tion today, as does research about women and
research done by women. Also, the intense
scrutiny regarding ethics in social research that
first surfaced a generation ago has accelerated.
Issues of informed consent and confidentiality
have been made even more complex by Internet
technology.

This text takes advantage of the widespread
availability of the Internet, not just as a store-
house of information (in some cases supplant-
ing books and articles) but also in providing
students, as the consumers and creators of
social science information, with interactive tools
to push their projects forward. The Research
Imagination is user-friendly for students who
like using the Internet. For example, Chap-
ters 7 and 14 include exercises that make use of
newly available software. In most chapters, there
are numerous references to online databases
and methods source materials. These are aca-
demic and commercial Web sites, annotated
bibliographies, and “how-to-do-it” tutorials. Almost all commercial links to data analysis software allow the reader to try out samples for a limited time. Students are encouraged to take advantage of these offers in order to determine which program best fits their needs and budget.

Teaching and Action Learning

We recognize the sheer volume and complexity of the material that is covered in most methods courses, so we show respect for the learning process by carefully building more complex ideas on the foundation of more basic concepts in the first three chapters and gradually elaborating ideas as we go. The writing in this text is accessible both to undergraduate and graduate-level audiences. Key terms and concepts are put in **bold capital letters** and definitions in **bold italics** when first presented. Personal experiences of the authors as researchers are interspersed throughout. In most chapters, there are boxed inserts showing how prominent researchers have used the various techniques. The instructor should keep in mind that the chapters on individual methods may be assigned in any order. This book has a distinct applied focus, in that the material is presented to be useful! So, the real test of whether students have completely understood the concepts in *The Research Imagination* lies in their ability to design and carry out investigations of their own.

Many of the homework or in-class exercises encourage students to enter the world of research. These optional exercises are designed to assist the instructor in making the reading come alive. *The Research Imagination* is written using an action learning pedagogy, an extremely effective technique that places emphasis on reflection as well as mastery of content. Using this approach, students can learn from their own experience in addition to what they learn from the text and outside readings. A Cambridge University Press Web site (www.cambridge.org/theresearchimagination) has been established as a companion to this text. It contains test banks, PowerPoint slides, exercises, and activities for classroom use.

The Plan of This Book

Chapters 1–4 may be considered introductory material – covering the scientific method, the interplay between social theory and methodology, research design, and measurement, respectively. These chapters provide a basic vocabulary for understanding the specific methods covered later in the text. Chapters 5–19 are designed to stand alone and may be assigned in any sequence, but they all convey the “research imagination” theme. Chapter 5 concerns ethics and politics in social research. It is placed relatively early in the text because an appreciation of important ethical dilemmas provides a context for, and informs the study of, topics like “Survey Research” (Chapter 7), “Observational Field Research” (Chapter 9), and “Experimental Research” (Chapter 12). Instructors and students especially interested in qualitative research might group together Chapters 8–11 (“Intensive Interviewing,” “Observational Field
Research,” “Feminist Methods,” and “Historical Analysis”). A quantitative cluster may comprise “Survey Research,” “Experimental Research,” “Content Analysis,” and “Aggregate Data Analysis,” as well as “Basic Statistical Analysis” and “Multivariate Analysis and Statistical Significance” (Chapters 7, 12–14, 18, and 19). The readings on “Sampling,” “Comparative Research Methods,” “Evaluation Research,” and “Indexes and Scales” (Chapters 6 and 15–17) present both quantitative and qualitative material.

Authors’ Responsibilities


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