



4-21-2019

A Practical Resource for the Social Sciences: A Book Review of Bruce Friedman's The Research Toolkit - Problem Solving Processes for the Social Sciences

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Recommended APA Citation

Faubert, S. E. (2019). A Practical Resource for the Social Sciences: A Book Review of Bruce Friedman's The Research Toolkit - Problem Solving Processes for the Social Sciences. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(4), 854-856. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss4/14>

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Abstract

Bruce D. Friedman provides an invaluable resource for social science researchers and practitioners to add to their “toolkit.” This book provides practical and straightforward guidance for understanding and conducting qualitative and quantitative research. As a social science researcher, sessional instructor, and doctoral student, reading this book answered important questions I had regarding the research process and implications of social science research. This review will discuss the primary tenets of the book as well as the relevance of this toolkit for student-researchers.

Keywords

Book Review, Research Toolkit, Mixed Methods

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A Practical Resource for the Social Sciences: A Book Review of Bruce Friedman's *The Research Toolkit – Problem Solving Processes for the Social Sciences*

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Bruce D. Friedman provides an invaluable resource for social science researchers and practitioners to add to their “toolkit.” This book provides practical and straightforward guidance for understanding and conducting qualitative and quantitative research. As a social science researcher, sessional instructor, and doctoral student, reading this book answered important questions I had regarding the research process and implications of social science research. This review will discuss the primary tenets of the book as well as the relevance of this toolkit for student-researchers. Keywords: Book Review, Research Toolkit, Mixed Methods

Dr. Friedman prefaces the book by discussing a challenge I have witnessed myself as a sessional instructor: students display an aversion to research and struggle with the relevance of academic material to real-life settings. In a recent course, I asked my students, Masters candidates in the social sciences, if they had considered pursuing a Ph.D. following their Masters. Of the twenty-two students in the lecture, no one displayed any interest. Common justifications included general disinterest in research, lack of time, or not wanting to return to school for various justifiable reasons. As an instructor, and as someone who is passionate about research, I try to instill in my students, a resonance and an appreciation for the literature. Dr. Friedman does an excellent job outlining this importance and the need to disseminate knowledge, specifically for those in the helping professions. Dr. Friedman has experiences with qualitative and quantitative research and has both practice and teaching experience. The content throughout the book is relevant to many social science practice areas. As a social worker, I found it easy to resonate with the examples used throughout the book (for example, issues relating to working with older adults and issues pertaining to homelessness). Dr. Friedman acknowledges that research can be “scary” and at times, intimidating, but by breaking content into manageable steps and by providing meaningful practice examples, *The Research Toolkit* reduces the anxiety some may have about research.

Friedman (2017) takes readers on a journey of research from beginning to end, starting with the basics. In chapter one, Friedman discusses “empirical generalizations” and provides definitions for theories, hypotheses, and other relevant terms. The author uses visual aids to explain the research design and research mapping (p. 6, p. 8) and thoroughly outlines the steps involved in the research cycle using simple language grounded in evidence-based practice. Chapter two discusses the research question and developing the study focus and purpose. Friedman introduces many types of questions, for example, questions of description, relationship questions, interaction questions, and causality questions (pp. 16-17). At the end of chapter two, the author offers an exercise that helps guide researchers toward a focused researchable question (p. 21). Chapter three covers the literature review process which in my experience, students (myself included) have historically found daunting. Friedman, an experienced researcher, offers some simple advice: *Keep It Simple*. Friedman guides readers through the search strategy including key terms and databases. The chapter ends with advice on writing the literature review and includes a literature review exercise (pp. 33-34).

If one thing stands out for me the most in my post-graduate experience, it is two simple words: *So What?* When I am writing, I ask myself this question in order to assure I have expanded enough on the topic and justified my stance. I encourage my students to do the same. Friedman asks a similar question in chapter four: *Who Cares?* Using the important example of homelessness, Friedman outlines the relevance of this question and addresses potential funding concerns. Chapter five and six take a turn toward quantitative traditions, and some readers may find it more complex. The author provides definitions of variables and reviews levels of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio). Illustrations provide insight into measures of central tendency and variability. Toward the end of the chapter, readers encounter standard deviation and an effectively-applied example of descriptive statistics (p. 62). Chapter seven and eight discuss hypotheses and the research design, respectively. Both chapters cover a large amount of information and discuss arguably some of the most important aspects of research including reliability, validity, and eliminating bias. Mixed methods are discussed in chapter eight. Sampling is discussed in chapter nine and in addition to an interesting discussion on qualitative sampling (p. 111) that includes discussion on extreme, or deviant case sampling. Chapter ten is another very important chapter concerning the protection of human subjects and explains the responsibility researchers have to respect participants at all times.

Chapters eleven through thirteen appealed to me as a qualitative researcher. Chapter eleven discusses inferential statistics and describes and contextualizes dependent and independent variables. The chapter ends with a useful instrument and data sources activity that allows readers to identify variables, data sources, attributes, and instruments. I was particularly impressed with the section on Code Books and Data Collection Forms and will incorporate these into field-work in the future. Chapter twelve is dedicated to qualitative research and explores patterns of discovery, pattern seeking, sources of data, and data collection. The final pages review data analysis and reporting and are directed toward “burgeoning” researchers and students alike. What I like most about this chapter is the useful journal article outline. This outline is clear and concise and would be helpful for students and those hoping to submit their work to journals or those submitting assignments at graduate and undergraduate levels.

In summary, this book is a great addition to the literature on research processes in the social sciences. It is clear and orderly and appropriately integrates practice and research in a way that resonates with students, educators, and practitioners in the social sciences. I would recommend this book to those who find research intimidating and are looking for straightforward facts. It is also appropriate for those looking for a quick but thorough review of problem-solving processes in the social science field.

Reference

Friedman, B. D. (2017). *The research toolkit: Problem solving processes for the social sciences* (3rd ed.). San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing.

Author Note

Sarah Faubert is a doctoral student and sessional instructor at the University of Windsor. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the University of Windsor. I was not contacted by the author nor the publisher to produce this review. Rather, as a social science practitioner, researcher, and educator, as well as a Ph.D. student, I wish to share my experience with those who may be interested. I have experience with qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: fauberts@uwindsor.ca.

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Article Citation

Faubert, S. E. (2019). A practical resource for the social sciences: A book review of Bruce Friedman's the research toolkit – problem solving processes for the social sciences. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(4), 854-856. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss4/14>
