

Doing Excellent Small-scale Research

Derek Layder
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I was captivated by the engaging title of this book and was hoping it would help me to strengthen our audit programme in clinical hospital practice at our regional health service. I was surprised and somewhat taken aback to discover the textbook was about doing social and qualitative research, which is outside my research expertise. I was relieved to learn from the preface that the book is intended as an introduction for a broad range of readers including novice researchers.

Layder is a senior and experienced researcher, research supervisor and teacher who authored another 11 published books. This experience is evident in a textbook with each chapter well laid out with clear introductions and summary points. The introductory chapter provides the overview and the final chapter consolidates the key learning from the book.

Layder uses a range of examples to illustrate aspects of the research method. Like many research method textbooks it has some dry tedious but important sections. But what would you expect? Also, there is no online support or material, which is increasingly used in 21st century publications. At almost 200 pages long, it is not a book you would sit down and complete in one reading. The learning comes from reading and discussing the content with other students and supervisors.

Layder succeeds in delivering a concise reference book for postgraduates and research supervisors. He covers the essentials of identifying a research question, study design, the use of quantitative and qualitative data, sampling and data analysis.

Undergraduates may be interested in borrowing a copy from the library and dipping in and out of the different sections. The list of references identifies the primary source of information and an index helps to identify key topics researchers might want to address. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on Imaginative Sampling that clarified all the questions I had about qualitative research.

What won me over were two key messages from Layder to the reader. First, is to write, write early, often and regularly. Second, is focussing on a 'doable' project. Layder also covers in some depth three essential research elements: ethical issues; validity; and developing the logic and structure for our research arguments and explanations.

Supervisors will identify with many of the situations or issues raised by Layder. For example, 'Often we assume that the very fact that we have thoughts and ideas and opinions on certain matters means that they must be reasonably well worked out. However, putting them down on paper often reveals that this assumption is invalid.' (p. 4).

If that is the only message the reader takes out of this book it would justify the purchase price.

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