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Martyn Denscombe (2003) *The Good Research Guide For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. Second edition. Buckingham: Open University Press. 310 pp. ISBN: 0 3352 1303 0

Martyn Denscombe’s *The Good Research Guide* is perfect to read, but less than perfect to use when actually commencing on a small-scale research project. The reviewer mentions three deficits:

- a discussion of causality is absent from the book;
- the book does not help researchers to design and execute their project, which entails a series of choices; in other words, the book is not sufficiently user-oriented;
- the book contains no examples of research projects.

The book’s author is professor of social research at the Faculty of Business and Law of De Montfort University (formerly Leicester Polytechnic).

The chapters of the book are given in table 1.

Part I Strategies for social research	Part II Methods of social research	Part III Analysis
1 Surveys 2 Case studies 3 Internet research 4 Experiments 5 Action research 6 Ethnology 7 Phenomenology 8 Grounded theory	9 Questionnaires 10 Interviews 11 Observation 12 Documents	13 Quantitative data 14 Qualitative data 15 Writing up the research

Table 1. Contents of *The Good Research Guide* by M. Denscombe

There are countless works on philosophy of science, research methods and techniques, and there are many histories of disciplines that describe (and explain) the development of scientific thought. Those works do not, however, get you started with a minor research project. If you are a student, practitioner or hold a junior academic position, you may find that methodology is communicated through philosophical erudition or with technical ingenuity—impressive but not very helpful. If you have little time and money and few hands available, and not much of research experience, then you want clear indications in order to move quickly through the landscape of social science. After all, research is not the purpose; it is a means to a goal. Of course, you also want a text easy to read.

Doing research means first to choose from the available spectrum of perspectives, methods and techniques and next to execute what is most applicable. The researcher's main questions are 'What do I want?' and 'How do I get it?'. I cannot imagine that a student of business administration or a staff member of a health institution starts his/her research project with a question like 'What is phenomenology?'. Denscombe's book explicitly promises to be a guide on how to conduct small-scale research projects. I therefore expect a 'do-it-yourself' book and I assume it will not be a guide to reflection only. My criteria will be accessibility, guidance and equipment.

The book has an extraordinarily clear structure. It contains attractive boxes, checklists and helpful internal references. The text is easy to understand and, most importantly, it covers all (but one) of the truly relevant issues. The quality of the coverage can be ascertained by comparing the book's content (see table 1) to that of a number of methodology hand-books: there exists a canon. That Denscombe mentions but does not adequately explain symbolic interactionism and that he does not go into the

mathematical details of statistics, is to be expected. As the author states repeatedly, software takes over computing standard deviation and correlation. Considering the aim and size of the book, the choice to leave such things out is entirely justified.

What is more difficult to accept, is that the book contains no substantial discussion of causality. You can take causality to be many things and I expect a methodology book to discuss a few of them. With Denscombe, the concept is not an issue and the term 'causality' is not included in the index either (the second edition's index!). Some explanation is given about for instance outliers, standard deviation and correlation, but aids touching upon causality are hardly dealt with. 'Researchers wishing to investigate connections in terms of cause and effect need to use regression analysis', is all it says (on p. 263). It turns out to be not very useful, but 'regression analysis' is mentioned in the index.

The book is less than perfect to use when actually commencing on a small-scale research project, this is a significant objection. The author does not guide consultants, practitioners or other project researchers through the process of designing and executing the most suitable way of doing research. The checklists at the end of each chapter do not suffice to help people along the series of choices they will have to make. The structure of the book, although very clear, proves to be methodology-oriented instead of user-oriented. If 'lay' questions had been at the core of the book, it might have been more of a guide. Examples are 'What kinds of information can I use for which purposes?', 'Which strategy and method(s) suit both my information need and the character of my public?' and 'How do I justify the results of my research?'. To mention just one situation for which the book offers little help, imagine that I am a policy evaluator torn between the political wishes of my principal and my own integrity as a researcher. How to tackle such a dilemma? And how do I present a critical evaluation in such a way that the

policy-maker learns from his/her failure in stead of to attack my evaluation research? Evaluation research is not even mentioned in the book.

Another objection concerning the book's user-friendliness, is that there are no examples of small-scale research projects. Without having to add too many pages, the author could have discussed a few situations to illustrate the consistency of research strategy and method or to demonstrate how you plan a research project in terms of time and money.