

Book Reviews

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Glen Elder and Janet Giele (eds.). *The Craft of Life Course Research*. NY: Guilford Press, 2009. ISBN 978-1-60623-320-7. 366 pps, \$42 USD.

With the increasing interest in and evidence of the exposure of contextual factors over the life course on health and society coupled with the methodological developments, the publication of *The Craft of Life Course Research* is ideally timed. As the editors Drs. Elder and Giele indicate, this research area has experienced incredible advances over the past 50 years. Their book describes these achievements and relevant approaches to life course research.

The Craft of Life Course Research is an excellent opportunity to learn about the history of this field and current work in life course research. Dr. Elder, a pioneer of such research, and Dr. Giele, a distinguished expert, convened specialists in this field to contribute to the book. This book is intended to show experienced investigators how to conduct life course research. However, those with a more limited background in research methods can also appreciate this book. In fact, it is a great resource for further reading on research from various disciplines including human development, psychology, public health, and sociology.

The Craft of Life Course Research begins with an introduction to life course research and the historical context which influenced its development (Chapter one). The book is then organized into three main sections: (1) methods of data collection, (2) measuring life course dynamics, and (3) investigating explanatory factors. The section on data collection covers topics on sources of data, collection methods, quality issues, and approaches to linkages. Chapter two discusses the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study and how this study has developed over time to accommodate emerging interests and needs. Chapter three focuses on collecting and interpreting administrative data to address life course research questions. Chapter four describes how ethnographic observations can be an important approach for sensitive topics. Chapter five discusses how to make effective and efficient use of longitudinal data. The next section is focused on the conceptualization and measurement of dynamic processes. The editors note a movement from analysis methods that model

specific events or transitions towards analysis methods that model trajectories (e.g. growth curve, latent class). Chapter six describes the cumulative process, in particular cumulative advantage theory and the stress process model. Chapter seven addresses transitional experiences and stress. Chapter eight focuses on individual trajectories while chapter nine focuses on group-based trajectories. The last section starts with how genes are expressed over the life span (Chapter ten). Chapter eleven is focused on agency – self-conception, motivation, relation, and personal integration. Chapter twelve discusses interpersonal level factors such as social linkages. Chapter thirteen discusses important life transitions in terms of time and place.

The Craft of Life Course Research addresses important aspects of life course research both in terms of theory and research practice. The book is anchored in a wide range of examples. The evolution of course research over the past several decades is a major theme of this book. The research has changed with advances in data collected (e.g. biomarkers, availability of data), computing, and methods. But it has also evolved to address changes in the complexities of the life course. Over the last several decades major life stages have changed in terms of the timing, sequence, and duration of major life events. For example, life expectancy has increased and age at first marriage and career patterns have changed.

The effort of the editors to incorporate emerging evidence (e.g. genetics) and to discuss modern statistical methods (e.g. multilevel or hierarchical modeling) is commendable, the latter being of particular importance as evaluating the complex mix of factors (e.g. geographic location, social context, life transitions, variations in timing of events, individual behaviors) in the life course is a challenging task. The editors and contributors successfully highlight modern analytic methods. While this book does not focus on microsimulation, such an approach can be a complement to life course research and could have been included. Microsimulation can link multiple processes and accommodate complex interactions between individuals and life choices. Contributors to this book point to the continued need to cross-fertilize theories and methods in order to maintain the progress that has been made in life course research. Microsimulation can be an important next step for making program and policy decisions relevant to the life course.

In summary, *The Craft of Life Course Research* is a readable, comprehensive key guide. I would recommend it to any researchers interested in the life course.

Reference

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Kathryn Roulston. *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications, 2010. ISBN 978-1-412948562. 184 pps, \$42.95 USD.

Qualitative research is often critiqued as anecdotal, susceptible to bias, and generally lacking scientific rigor (Mays and Pope 1995). These critiques stem in part from qualitative research being held to the same standards as quantitative research (Devers 1999). However, qualitative research and quantitative research are based on fundamentally distinct epistemological assumptions. In her book *Reflective Interviewing*, Kathryn Roulston acknowledges the misguided belief that qualitative researchers can simply ask interviewees the “right” questions and they will provide us with the information needed to answer our research questions. This belief has served to undermine the quality of some qualitative studies and, therefore, devalue findings that emerge from this type of research. Roulston challenges the belief by demonstrating the complexity of qualitative interviewing. In her book she covers a variety of topics from considering one’s theoretical assumptions to developing methods of data collection and analysis. In each step of the process she urges researchers to be reflexive – a tool that is invaluable to qualitative research. Reflexivity refers to researchers’ ability to be “self-consciously aware of their subjectivities in relation to the research participants and the research topic” (Roulston 2010, p. 89). Roulston contends that in order to achieve reflexivity, a researcher must understand the relationship between theory and method and must be critical of assumptions underlying their own work. She outlines three steps qualitative researchers can use to improve their reflexivity: 1) examine the theoretical assumptions underlying the method, 2) examine their subjective position in relation to the research and 3) examine and be critical of the interview interaction. These themes are present throughout the book as she takes the reader through the various steps of conducting a research study which utilizes qualitative interviews.

The first chapter introduces the reader to various forms individual interviews may take and the implications for the knowledge produced. Roulston defines for the reader differences between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews and covers various forms of interviewing, including phenomenological, ethnographic, feminist, oral and life history, and dialogic interviewing. In her discussion she explains how the different forms of interviewing are shaped by specific theoretical assumptions and produce different kinds of information. Chapter 2 provides an overview of interviewing groups of people. Roulston uses focus groups as an example of interviewing in groups and discusses the various components involved in designing a focus group study, from recruitment and scheduling of participants to designing questionnaires and topic guides, to managing the group interaction. Although Roulston covers many important aspects to consider when conducting focus groups, this chapter seems out of place given the remaining content of the book. In Chapter 3 Roulston discusses the importance of the relationship between theory and method. She introduces the reader to various theoretical approaches, including, neo-positivist, romantic, constructionist, postmodern, transformative, and decolonizing, and discusses the implications of these theoretical assumptions for data collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the more concrete “how-to” chapters in the book. Chapter 4 sets out for the reader how to move from one’s theoretical assumptions to developing a method of data collection. In this chapter Roulston discusses how to formulate one’s research questions, sampling, and ensuring quality research given one’s theoretical assumptions. In Chapter 5 Roulston provides practical considerations for gaining consent, recruitment and scheduling, conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews.

In Chapters 6 and 7 Roulston returns to her initial argument – the need for researchers to be reflective in their work. In Chapter 6 she first defines the role of reflexivity and subjectivity in research, and then provides the reader with practical steps to improving their own reflexivity. These steps include writing subjectivity statements, keeping research journals, interviewing the researcher (themselves) to determine why their research questions are important, as well as their own subjective position in relationship to the research agenda. In Chapter 7 she encourages the reader to examine moments in interviews that are both problematic and effective as ways to understand how data is co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee. Rather than provide prescriptive rules or best practices for how to ensure optimal interactions during qualitative interviews, she provides a number of excerpts from actual interviews as examples of problematic and effective interactions to demonstrate how one might be mindful of one’s own actions and the reactions they produce in the interview setting.

Chapter 8 is the only chapter in the book that directly focuses on data analysis. In this chapter Roulston presents and briefly describes different approaches to analyzing interview data, such as differences between inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning, and methods of analysis that emerge from these approaches, including grounded theory, ethnographic analysis, phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis, ethnomethodological and conversation analysis. In the final chapter of the book Roulston provides insight from experienced qualitative researchers. Skilled researchers discuss their own research practices and provide advice to novice researchers on developing their own research studies.

The most significant contributions of this book are Roulston’s discussion of the relationship between theory and methods, and the importance of being reflective about one’s own work to improve data quality. To illustrate her point, Roulston draws on various theoretical assumptions and methods of data collection and analysis. Although descriptions of these methods are limited, she provides many helpful references for those who are interested in pursuing these topics further. Readers should take advantage of these references, as this book cannot stand alone as a single reference in one’s repertoire. In order to fully master the theories and methods discussed in this book, readers are encouraged to refer to the original sources. Finally, while the target audience for this book is novices to qualitative interviewing, Roulston’s discussion of reflexivity is a good review for any qualitative researcher.

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