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### **Original Citation**

Pressler, Shirley J. (2011) Book Review: Sanders L. D. (2010), Discovering Research Methods in Psychology: A Students Guide, BPS/Wiley-Blackwell. *Social Psychology Review*, 13 (1).

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***Discovering Research Methods in Psychology: A Students Guide***

**Lalage D Sanders**

BPS Wiley-Blackwell (2010)

Paperback: 330 pp; £16.99

ISBN: 978-1-4051-7530-2

***Reviewed by Shirley J Pressler, University of Huddersfield***

Discovering Research Methods in Psychology does just what the title suggests. It guides the reader through a range of methodological techniques, whilst utilising a variety of strategies in the midst of a breadth of content, exploring real world issues that are meaningful for contemporary students.

There is a brief *Introduction on How to Use This Book* which nicely sets the scene for what is to follow and it is at this point, that the style of writing is noticeably one involving audience engagement at every level. The style engages the reader at the personal level, outlines the over-arching methodological techniques of observation, experimental manipulation and survey methods, and indicates where there is professional consensus and non-consensus. For example, the author refers to questioning what actually constitutes survey methods, hence indicating from the start the distinction between clarity and ambiguity amongst the profession, which is very re-assuring for novice researchers. There is a clear outline of the **purposes** of the book – introducing *principles* and *terminology* used in research methods, and hence necessary conceptual understanding; and, the **intention** of the book – developing subject matter *curiosity* and *enthusiasm*, by way of questioning and probing amongst research involving real world issues. Next, the reader is informed about the content and structure of the chapters of the book; with emphasis given to ethics to start and then indicating which of the three major methodological techniques introduced have relevance for each of the sixteen topical research study areas to follow, from which the reader is encouraged to select. Here it is clearly stated that each study topic can be read in isolation, with each being considered in terms of strengths and weaknesses as well as three important questions relating to safety of study conclusions, effectiveness of the design and appropriateness of the research method. The chapters to be selected from to

follow do live up to the expectations set at this stage. In this sense they are excellent in terms of demonstrating, and engaging the reader with, the research related critical skills required of psychology students.

Overarching techniques are embedded throughout and appear to aim to foster deeper understanding of necessary methodological concepts, alongside professional standards and practices. More obvious specific techniques are consistently used throughout the book chapters where the student becomes familiar with applying psychological learning techniques. For example, the use of probing question asking and defining standard concepts. In addition each of the research topic chapters has clear summary points to end, reinforcing research design related concepts introduced. Also, the strategy of illustrating a piece of contemporary research, alongside critical reflection, is effectively utilised in each of these main body chapters.

After the brief but essential introductory chapter, the second chapter is where professional standards and practices begin to be enhanced. This chapter gives focus to ethics by way of application to real world issues, whilst drawing the reader to question and challenge moral issues. In addition it also provides some historical reflection, important to how social psychology has developed. Whilst introducing ethics it also demonstrates how to move from historically situated, now considered unethical, to more ethically suitable research. In this sense, the book supports and promotes necessary acceptable professional research standards and practice. This is a major strength of the text, as ethical considerations as well as critical reflection of research findings do prevail throughout.

A final chapter on *Contrasting Methods* draws on the third important question asked in each of the topical research study chapters; by exploring the appropriateness of each particular topic research method in relation to considering suitable alternatives. Here a more methodologically integrative approach to learning is advocated. Indicating appropriate alternatives for topics in this manner is beneficial as this is something the student body often struggle with.

Throughout the book the reader is referred to the supplementary sections to end. For example *Key Topics* is where you find reference to methods of statistical analysis, along with illustrations and guidance, and assistance with writing

up and referencing. This is followed by a *Glossary* where research terminology is given more than the often too usual brief vague string of words in explanation. Instead, the level of detail here varies depending on necessity for purposes of clarity of understanding, without being over embellished.

It is refreshing to see emphasis to important aspects of research methods in support of student learning and statistical analysis being given somewhat of a 'back seat' for a change. In this sense I feel the book has achieved the stated aim of aiding the *newcomer* learner in overcoming any fear they have of quantitative methods. That said, the book is not restricted to only quantitative techniques as stated therein, but instead attempts to redress an often observed imbalance amongst certain students and in university departments today. This book also helps to dispel any myths and misconceptions surrounding social psychology, fostered by an overemphasis of alliance with qualitative methods that can be observed amongst members of university departments as well as within university departmental teaching on modules delivered. Here, it is important to note that research topics covered are not restricted to social psychology, but instead focus on a breadth of interesting applied areas. What I do like about this book is that it addresses the issue of choosing qualitative methodology because of a belief that quantitative is too difficult, or mysterious. As stated to begin, *newcomers to research are rarely frightened by qualitative methods* (p2). Thus the stance of the writer appears to foster a real choice between qualitative and quantitative techniques, or both, for both more established researchers and novice students alike. This seems a very good way of overcoming the pull to qualitative methods for the wrong reasons, in line with what is demonstrated in reference to fear, as cited above.

Overall, *Discovering Research Methods in Psychology* would be excellent in respect of undertaking a comprehensive approach to research methods training, which could easily be added to by way of some expansion on the supplementary statistical analysis introduced. It is refreshing to see a resource with a commonsense approach to research methods delivery devoid of an overwhelming use of statistical techniques with more and more numbers, which can often confuse student understanding to begin. Instead the basics of understanding research design in a concrete and today's world manner have appeal, especially as

how is this relevant to me, as a learner, is part and parcel of what is presented. So much of psychology tells us that relevance for self is an important part of learning and especially in respect of developing the deeper understanding necessary for conceptual understanding. Thus, I feel this book achieves sensible application of psychological understanding in terms of the approach to student learning as well as in respect of appeal.

I would certainly recommend this book to the novice that it states it aims to serve; hence it is highly suitable for year one undergraduates. However, conceptual understanding of research methods is not always retained from first experiences for the novice, as any experienced teacher of research methods understands. In addition some coverage of more complex designs and mixed methods approaches is undertaken. So students could retain use of the book for guidance and consolidation throughout their intermediate degree level studies. I also anticipate that the approach used in the book by way of use of a reasonably contemporary research study, with clear direction in relation to design and allied analysis, on a topic by topic basis, would be very helpful in support of final year dissertation topic development. This would especially assist at the level of moving on from a personally appealing study topic and developing one of ownership and different research method approach within the chosen topic. This for me is therefore appealing for final year students and I am sure they would find this book a very good companion in this sense. The study topics have contemporary appeal, for example Eating Disorders, Romance and Heavy Drinking, to name a few, is included. One recommendation would be to have a supplementary further reading section to help in addition.

From a teaching perspective the book reminds us of the need for a focus on research practical work, and it would be a very good source in this respect. We have seen lots of focus on SPSS and statistics without numbers and so on elsewhere, where confusion can often arise and where we can sometimes lose sight of the purpose of research method 'apprenticeship', or training. In my experience this is variable within university departments. This book grounds us in the practical side of learning about and exploring a variety of research methods, in a meaningful and conceptually inductive manner, which is a useful reminder for contemporary psychology departments, in

order that they do not lose sight of the essence of research methods.

Overall, I feel this book is refreshing in approach and is pedagogically sound. I would certainly recommend it to both students and tutors alike.