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JEFF MILLER, JONATHAN DEUTSCH, Food studies: An Introduction to Research Methods

Oxford, Berg, 2009, 256 p.

As is clear from the title and subtitle, this book is framed as an introductory guide to the central research methods that are used in the emergent and interdisciplinary field that is contemporary 'food studies'. Rather than containing an exhaustive account of every approach to data collection and analysis that is possible, then, it aims to sketch, in broad brushstrokes, the general field and encourage the nascent practitioner of food studies to go out on their own and pursue relevant issues in greater depth. The text is full of helpful guidance, and largely achieves the aims it sets for itself with aplomb, although it would have been nice to have seen some more space devoted to a general discussion of forms of textual analysis that exist outside of historical methods.

The authors Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch both have thoroughly interdisciplinary backgrounds in terms of teaching and research. Their interests run the full range from food and culture, to more applied tourism and hospitality aspects of food studies as well as more obviously food science and nutritional concerns. This makes them ideally placed to describe the range of approaches used within contemporary food studies, which, as they put it: 'runs a broad gamut of topics, home disciplines, theoretical orientations, and research methodologies' (p.4). Inclusivity is the key, and, as messy as that can be, it accurately describes the complexity of 'food studies' at least as it is understood in a North American context.

Overall the book is split into two main sections. The first contains four chapters, the first two of which introduce and contextualise food studies, and establish the nature of 'research' as an activity – emphasising the place of theory within it, as well as the key role of analysis at the heart of it. The next two chapters in this section deal with ethical issues, and detail the value of undertaking a topical literature review, as well as providing instruction on how one is conducted (as a process) and written up (as an artefact).

The second section contains five chapters. These include individual chapters involving discussion of each of four broad 'baskets' (as the authors put it) of research methods that are used within contemporary food studies, as it is broadly conceived. These four baskets are made up of the following: Historical Methods, Quantitative Methods, Observational Methods and Using Material Objects. Each of the chapters is followed by a corresponding interview with a noted American expert in each area (Ken Albala, Jeffery Sobal, Carole Counihan and Psyche Williams-Forson respectively). The second section ends with a chapter about some of the technological tools we might want to use as part of food studies research – either for the analysis of data, or for the efficient storage of academic references.

The discussion of composing a literature review will, in my view, be particularly useful for teaching purposes in a number of related disciplines. The process of conducting a literature review has been, in my experience, something with which many undergraduate students struggle initially, even when directed to suitable 'how to' textbooks. I will be recommending this text to students who need to master this process for more generic social science (sociological, criminological, psychological) purposes – specifically as part of the preparation for them undertaking their undergraduate dissertations. The text is certainly also suitable for those wanting guidance for work at a higher level than this.

In terms of being useful in its totality for a European audience, or any audience beyond the borders of the United States, there is one significant problem with the book. This is in relation to the chapter that is devoted to the consideration of ethical issues in the uses of human subjects. While in principle much of the content of this chapter is applicable in other geographical and national contexts, much of the discussion is also framed in reference to various specific legal frameworks that apply directly only within the United States. This is unfortunate.

The brief interviews with experts included following the four substantive methods basket chapters are particularly helpful and engaging, and enrich these more expositional chapters greatly. They certainly bring some of the main issues concerned to life – making them tangible – as well as giving them a sense of personality, and clarifying some of their contingencies. The extent to which the personalisation involved also helps to make the issues seem more ‘applied’ is also helpful in this regard. We do not only receive a sense of what each of the methods consists of in principle, but also a more immediate sense of how and why they matter, how and why they are preferred by a particular individual who uses them with regularity to good effect within their own work on food.

It has to be said that the final chapter on the uses of technological tools in storing and organizing literature and data is rather brief, if not cursory, and is a rather strange way to end a book of this type. While some of this includes appropriate descriptions of the software, quite a lot of promotional ‘blurb’ from the manufacturers is also included, which seems to be a little ill-fitting in an academic text. In fact, while the book ends with this chapter, it finishes immediately after a rather abrupt discussion of GIS (Geographical Information Systems) analysis, which was written by someone other than the two main authors (Joel Lindau). I cannot help thinking that something more akin to a summary and call to action to undertake food studies research using the basket of methodological ‘goodies’ on show within the rest of the text would have brought things to a much neater and rather more logical conclusion. Undoubtedly there will be a second edition of the text in a few years time, and perhaps the authors will rework this aspect of the text somewhat.

Generally speaking, though, the text is superbly clear to read, and, in fact, Miller and Deutsch’s text epitomises the clarity of writing that should feature in any introductory academic text. It is certainly ideal as an introduction to the main strands (or ‘baskets’) of methods that are used in food studies, as broadly conceived. Several sections within this book will almost certainly constitute required reading for final year undergraduate students (across multiple social science and humanities disciplines) who are interested in conducting a food studies style dissertation. Similarly, it will be extremely useful for first year postgraduates embarking on Masters or PhD research, who want a very general grounding in, and guide to, the main methodological issues that they will need to confront in order to negotiate the research process successfully.

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