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**Researching Sustainability: A Guide to Social Science Research Methods,  
Practice and Engagement**

Alex Franklin and Paul Blyton (Eds)

*Earthscan, Abingdon and New York, 2011. 352pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84971-122-7.*

The concept of sustainability has an increasingly prominent role in shaping decisions over policy development and practice. Despite its importance, the concept remains difficult to define and therefore analyse across specific contexts. Furthermore, research into sustainability is compounded by the challenges inherent in interdisciplinary and longitudinal methods. The collection aims to identify existing research practice in the field of sustainability. The editors argue in the Introduction (p3) that, by including contributions from advocates and examining specific projects, ‘the reader is able to compare multiple arguments or cases put forward for methods used in particular circumstances.’

The book is divided into three parts. After outlining the challenges and opportunities involved in researching sustainability (Part I), the focus shifts to examine a range of research methods. Franklin and Blyton note the exploratory or preliminary nature of much sustainability research, resulting in a focus on qualitative methods. This is reflected in the chapters contained in Part II, ranging from ethnography (Chapter Three) and case study (Chapter Four) methods to discourse analysis (Chapter 10) and constructivist (Chapter 11) approaches. The collection synthesises these diverse research methods, illustrating their relevance and application to the study of sustainability. Part III moves beyond research methods and examines the opportunities and challenges researchers are presented with when engaging wider audiences including policy makers and the media.

Through this diversity of approaches, the authors examine and demonstrate the complexity of sustainability research. In Chapter Five, Newton and Parfitt examine participatory action research from the perspective of the researcher and the researched. The role of the researched is particularly salient in the context of sustainability, where action and behavioural change is central to achieving desired future conditions. In addition, the chapter recognises the role of emotions in

facilitating or hampering research projects; a consideration of the emotions of those involved can strengthen the research process, as well as lead to lasting impacts. Emotions also feature in Chapter 12 by Obara and Robinson in their discussion of the challenges of conducting research abroad. The issues raised in this chapter are hitherto underexamined but salient in view of the increasing mobility of researchers, resulting in greater exposure to different cultural settings and behaviours.

Alongside more conventional research methodologies, the collection examines techniques that may be less familiar to sustainability researchers. In Chapter Six, Emma Dean uses mobile methods to examine how people utilise farmers' markets, asking what role space plays in sustainable practices. Social construction of space is a key aspect of sustainability, as it enables an understanding of how such spaces are used with the possibility of encouraging more sustainable behaviour. In Chapter 13, Morgan and Bailey consider the application of futures modelling in researching the impact of current actions alongside alternative scenarios. In view of the future orientation of sustainability, determination of the potential effects of current actions is increasingly necessary, though complex.

Part III of the collection examines how research findings on sustainability can be disseminated beyond the academic world. Chapters 14-17 examine how to generalise research findings, the influencing of policy development, the communication of sustainability to children, and engagement of the media. As Blyton and Jenkins note, there is increasing pressure for research findings to be disseminated to general audiences. Developing skills and an understanding of these distinct contexts is essential to the success (or otherwise) of attempts to communicate findings to wider audiences. For example Llyr Roberts (Chapter 15) outlines some of the key ways in which policy is formulated, emphasising the important role of individuals within the policy infrastructure. The chapter also highlights that competing interests (and organisations) need to be taken into account when attempting to engage policymakers. Similarly, Lorraine Frater (Chapter 17) argues that when working with the media, researchers are required to shift the thinking and presentation of their work.

This book is a useful addition to the existing range of social science research methods texts. In identifying existing research into sustainability from multiple perspectives, the authors have successfully opened and furthered a discussion on what researching sustainability actually means. The selection of authors who are able to advocate for particular methods, through an examination of their experience using the methods, provides for a robust and enthusiastic analysis. Although advocating particular methods, each chapter provides clear details on the origins of the method being examined before considering application in practice. In the Conclusion Terry Marsden (p311-12) points to a:

real need for a more interdisciplinary, place-based action research, conducted preferably longitudinally and incorporating comparative case studies of adaptations to unsustainable practices.

The interdisciplinary character of sustainability research is clearly exemplified through the range of methods adopted by contributors as well as the issues examined. Exploration of ways in which different methods could be integrated in practice would have strengthened the argument for the use of mixed methods. A consideration of how social scientists might establish connections and collaborations with researchers in other areas of sustainability research, in particular the natural sciences, would also have been useful.

Overall the book provides a useful examination of some of the key methods in the study of sustainability. The content would be of interest to readers ranging from graduate students designing a research project through to experienced researchers who seek to engage with issues of sustainability from novel perspectives.

*Thomas O'Brien*

*Centre for International Security and Resilience, Cranfield University*