

# From Theory to Methodology and Back Again: The Need for Planning Researchers to Engage with Methodological Concerns

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## *Introduction*

Concerns associated with the development and implementation of the methodologies which underpin empirical investigations often seem to be treated as if they are of marginal significance to the research endeavour. For example, refereed journal articles seldom discuss the detailed decisions surrounding the conduct of a piece of research. This element is omitted in favour of concentration on the theory informing the research and the implications of the findings; yet it is the methodology which provides the link between the theory and the findings and consequently is instrumental in determining the validity and reliability of the conclusions. The result of this lack of discussion and engagement with methodological concerns has been the creation of something of an academic myth that carrying out a study is a relatively straight-forward and unproblematic undertaking. Experience suggests quite the reverse and that moreover if the quality of research is to develop and progress in the planning field there is much to be gained from open and honest discussion of the theoretical and practical issues associated with the methodological aspects of research. The purpose of this paper therefore is a plea for greater engagement with methodological concerns. In the context of this discussion it is assumed that methodology includes both the techniques used in the field to collect data and also the approach adopted to analyse and interpret the resulting material. The paper is divided into two parts, the first examines existing perspectives on research methods in planning while the second focuses on the seemingly poorly developed relationship between theory and methodology.

### *Myths About Research*

The myths that surround research methods are strongly influenced by the way they are taught and presented in the literature. The following issues will be examined in the paper:

- \* The approach to teaching research methods tends to treat such concerns as separable from the rest of the research process. Often it seems as though the nature of the research question to be investigated automatically defines the method to be adopted and that the process of data collection merely takes the form of the implementation of the chosen method. Consequently, fieldwork seems to be conceptualised as much the same as following a recipe in a cookery book.
- \* Competence in research methods is often conceived as distinct from and superior to the skills of the planning practitioner or those personal skills utilised in everyday life. For example competence in human encounters such as research interviews is important to both practitioners and researchers.
- \* A distinction is often made in discussions about research methods between quantitative and qualitative styles of approach with the associated implication that researchers can be divided into two discrete groups. This is an unhelpful distinction which tends to foster divisions and a lack of communication between researchers.
- \* There are tensions in the doctoral process between gaining in-depth skills in one particular research method and the more general objective of training competent all-round social scientists. The key UK research council has favoured the latter approach.

### *The Relationship between Theory and Methodology in Research*

This section of the paper concentrates on the relationship between theory and methodology in planning research. The last decade has seen a welcome re-engagement within the academic planning community with theoretical debates current within the social sciences. However, while the implications of these theoretical developments can be seen in the evolution of normative

thinking and explanation about the nature of planning practice, discussions have been largely silent about methodological concerns. Hence, while embracing the work of inter alia Giddens, Habermas, Foucault and Derrida the 'kit-bag' of tools available to empirical researchers has remained both unchanged and unquestioned. The social theorists with which planning theory has engaged have questioned the very nature of what through much of the twentieth century has been taken-for-granted as 'knowledge', yet the mechanisms utilised by researchers to explore the world have changed little. For example, normative thinking about policy making in the planning field have developed considerably, leading to greater focus on process rather than outcomes, yet the tools for policy evaluation remain relatively unchanged. Whether this trend in normative thinking is desirable is for another paper. The issue of concern here is the extent to which methodological developments have kept pace with other theoretical developments in planning. How should the effectiveness of more participatory (collaborative) approaches to policy making be assessed?

Given this general context the remainder of this section will explore the following issues:

- \* Much of the current theoretical debate within planning attempts to make connections between the micro-politics of planning practice and more general structural processes within society. Are methodologies currently available to examine these relationships through empirical investigations or will they remain the preserve of abstract theorising? A number of existing studies will be used to explore this issue.
  
- \* The importance of encouraging more open discussion of the methodologies being used by researchers is exemplified in the growing number of studies apparently investigating the same issue yet deriving very different theoretical and practical implications (for example the process of plan making). 'How you know what you've found' is profoundly influenced by the methodology adopted and therefore should be subject to open discussion. Experienced researchers know carrying out research is an often messy and complex process; to pretend it is otherwise is to diminish the potential insights to be gained.

***Conclusion***

The argument underlying this paper is that theoretical developments in planning while influencing normative thinking and explanation have had much less impact on research methodologies. This is due, at least in part, to the myths which have tended to surround teaching and writing about research methods. Future developments in planning theory and practice can only benefit from greater engagement with methodological issues and open debate over the complexities of undertaking research. Moreover, the particular obligation that planning researchers have to the world of practice suggests that methodological developments within planning are likely to have implications both within policy arenas and the social science community more generally.