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Why Research Methods Matter: Essential Skills for Decision-Making by Susan Gooden and RaJade Berry-James

Samuel L. Myers, Jr. – University of Minnesota

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This book is a timely supplement to conventional graduate-level and advanced undergraduate texts on research methods. The authors promote the book as a main text for public administrators who will become consumers rather than producers of research. The text covers the “why” of qualitative and quantitative research methods and examines some of the strengths and weaknesses of standard techniques such as surveys, data collection, and experiments. A significant contribution of the text is its emphasis on cultural competency and research ethics. Susan Gooden, interim dean and professor of public administration and policy at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, and RaJade Berry-James, associate professor of public administration in the School of Public and International Affairs at North Carolina State University, both have extensive experience teaching and researching social equity, program evaluation, and research methods.

The book begins with a novel discussion of the “art of research methods,” where the authors focus on explaining to non-technical audiences the reasons they should care about the methods researchers use to study practical issues. In the discussion, they highlight the need to pay attention to cultural competence and ethics along with other concerns of context, resources, time, and what they call “behind the scenes” elements of technical research. The authors then provide a surprisingly non-technical introduction to the processes of program evaluation, monitoring, process evaluation, and outcome evaluation. They also provide an intuitive description of “evidence-based decision-making.” Ultimately, the authors intend to provide a guide for understanding what questions to ask in order to guide decision-making.

Because the use of primary data is the main focus of the research methods examined in the text, the authors pay specific attention to questions about the protection of human subjects and the

ethics of collecting information from or surveying research subjects. They include an in-depth list of fundamental questions that program managers should ask before undertaking or approving any data collection. This section of the book is followed by practical issues associated with research design and covers key ideas behind causality, internal and external validity, and experimental and quasi-experimental research designs.

The book has three more advanced chapters on variable definition, questionnaire design, and questionnaire construction. These chapters are particularly appropriate for economists and quantitative policy analysts who may be familiar with applied regression techniques using secondary data but unfamiliar with the protocols of collecting original data. There is a brief chapter on data collection strategies covering mail, Internet, telephone and in-person interviews. A strong case is made for using mixed methods when one or more research tools provide an incomplete or inconsistent picture of a problem a manager seeks to solve.

The final chapters provide nontechnical introductions on statistical significance and the application of research findings to action. Eight of the nine chapters have discussion questions, implications for practice, and detailed references.

The authors have written this book for a nontechnical audience, stating at the outset that the intended audience is primarily non-technical managers who wish to be intelligent consumers of technical research. As such, the language used in the book is appropriately accessible to persons with limited or no statistical background. With this in mind, the book covers a number of nagging questions that applied econometricians and advanced students of quantitative policy analysis often face: How do I know whether I can trust the data collected? Why do some groups respond differently to particular questions or standard-format questionnaires, especially when cultural contexts differ? What is it about collecting primary data that could eventually lead to unresolvable estimation issues? The *other* audience for this book, then—advanced undergraduates in research methods courses and graduate students—needs this book as much as the intended audience of non-technical managers and administrators.

In recent months, I have used Gooden and Berry-James' book extensively with two groups: leaders of nonprofit and local community-based organizations, and mid-level public administrators and state and local officials. The first group was part of a novel training program funded by the Minneapolis Foundation called the Wilkins Community Fellows Program. This group undertook a one-week boot camp in policy analysis tools and techniques, where the main text for the past five years had been Bardarch and Patashnik's (2016), *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to problem solving*.

The second group was from a longstanding Executive Leadership Program of the National Forum for Blacks in Public Administration. This group had a curriculum focused on problem structuring, evidence, and the theory and practice of recommendation. The program uses Dunn's (2018) book, *Public policy analysis: An integrated approach*. With both groups, discussions about evidence were improved after students had an opportunity to read Gooden and Berry-James' book. For the most part, the groups felt that the book was accessible, and they appreciated having an supplemental text, especially since both tend to assume that readers have an advanced statistics background.

I, therefore, see the value of incorporating this "nontechnical" text into advanced quantitative methods classes. A text like this should help familiarize students with applied econometrics and quantitative policy analysis. The book should also offer students useful insight into questionnaire construction, primary data collection, and survey design. Ultimately, Gooden and Berry-James'

book is appropriate for advanced graduate students who want to learn more about not only the ethics of doing research with vulnerable populations but also cultural competence.

Although I would have liked to see a chapter that more directly discussed the weaknesses and limitations of randomized controlled as well as the lack of external validity of many high-profile experiments (e.g., those measuring racial profiling or surveys designed to detect racism or racialized perceptions), this is a text that certainly helps students understand that the real users of research—decision-makers, public administrators, and managers—often do not know or understand the technical details of our work. These users, though, are smart enough to know that we often make unrealistic assumptions and draw erroneous conclusions from our data-driven analyses with remote connections to the practical concerns of day-to-day users of our work.

While this book is aimed at public administrators and decision-makers, it provides an exhaustive list of questions that any savvy consumer of research should be prepared to ask. Technical researchers, therefore, are urged to read this book so that they can be prepared to convincingly address fundamental questions about why research methods matter.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Author Biography

Samuel L. Myers, Jr. is Roy Wilkins Professor of Human Relations and Social Justice at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He is a member of the graduate faculty in the Ph.D. program in Applied Economics, University of Minnesota. He teaches applied policy analysis and advanced quantitative methods courses.