Book Review: Doing Research in the Business World by David E. Gray

In **Doing Research in the Business World***,* **David E. Gray** *offers an expansive textbook exploring diverse methodologies for undertaking research in business. Covering an impressive span of approaches and well-structured, this work will not only be an excellent resource for students and researchers but* [Richard Cotter](#) *also highly recommends it to practitioners in the business world.*

Doing Research in the Business World. David E. Gray. Sage, 2017.

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Alongside what might be described as a form of popular, at the moment largely [guru- and consultant-driven](#) appetite for AI, robotics, machine learning and other new varieties of techno-mathematical prescriptions within the field of business and management, [a craze for analytics can be added](#). How much of this is worthwhile wheat and how much perishable chaff remains to be seen, but there seems to be something significant in it, something which makes this book and others like it important. This is because what is lasting and needed now and always amongst fads are sound approaches to understanding, explaining and even trying to 'predict' (scare quotes deliberate) organisations and the actions of those who work in them. It is in the service of this latter and more difficult, long distance goal that David E. Gray's tome is pressed.

Doing Research in the Business World is a research textbook, covering a diverse range of methodologies and methods, from surveys to [action research](#) approaches. This impressive philosophical and methodological span — all the more noteworthy when one remembers it is single-authored — makes it a concrete block of a book, weighing in at over 800 pages. This makes the organisation of content an important consideration and thankfully the work is excellently structured. In a nutshell, the book is comprehensive, authoritative, laden with interesting case examples and would make profitable reading for those who wish or need to research the business world.

Gray opens with an introduction which argues persuasively for the need for rigorous approaches to research in business; covers the nature of theories and the research process; and ends with three pages devoted to how the book is organised. To this, a further three link the material to what he refers to as 'employability skills', mapped alongside the relevant 'research skills' to which these relate (10). Given the considerable scope of the work, this detailed approach to orienting the reader is warranted. The focus on connecting research prowess to enhanced employability also adds value, as readers are encouraged to develop their research skills in ways that can benefit their professional lives. This is clever and it touches on an important point: the need for practitioners in particular to deepen their research skills, a task which this book is extremely well positioned to support.

After the introduction, there are four major sections to the book, the largest (unsurprisingly) devoted to research methodology. Each section is helpfully colour-coded, and all the chapters begin with an introduction, outline and a list of keywords. Also useful is a set of graphic 'icon keys' which identify, amongst other things, where online videos are available on the publisher's website to augment the written material, and where further reading is recommended by the author.
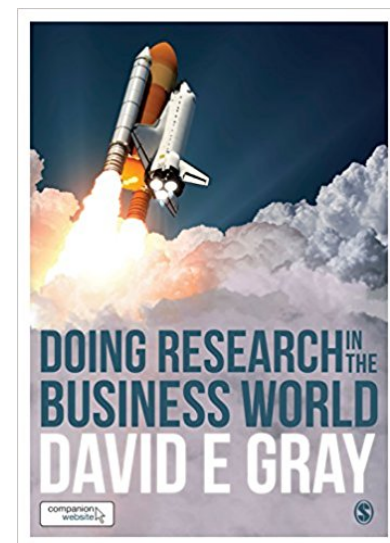
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To give a flavour of some of the content the book contains, I consider two of the book's most insightful chapters. In Chapter Two, Gray deals deftly with the philosophical and theoretical topics underpinning any research endeavour. This is a vital area, but one which often intimidates new researchers and can even wrongfoot the more experienced. As Gray himself notes, a 'bewildering array of theoretical perspectives and methodologies' (21) are available, and choosing among them in a way that coheres intellectually is challenging. Gray does a good job of making clear how the steps and concepts involved must be stacked so that they build upon one another. He also offers some pragmatic advice about selecting the right research approach based on the phenomena one is trying to understand and the questions one is asking about them. He also covers advocate stances well, such as feminism, critical theory and postmodernism. A selection of useful process graphs complete the help provided in this chapter: for example, a handy one visualising the elements of the research process and how they connect together.

In Chapter Thirteen, Gray explains action research with a focus on how it can be used to effect change in business contexts. He starts by declaring that 'action research methodology symbolises much of what modern research is about – analysing the world but also trying to change it' (336). He continues with a brief history of the approach, beginning with its origins in the work of [Kurt Lewin](#). He then unpacks what action research means, the various guises it can take, how it operates and in what research situations it may be used most effectively. But Gray adds an important caveat that practitioners should keep in mind: the action researcher cannot change things on their own, and 'the success of action research will depend, in large measure, on your success with working with other people' (340). Thus, action research is an inherently political method, and action, [as Hannah Arendt famously put it](#), is something people do together, entangled in the plural 'web of human relationships' they inhabit.

Gray brings his discussion of action research to life with two case studies, which offer a practical sense of its dynamics in a real-world setting. We hear, for example, of an action research study into employee non-compliance with a company's information security policies. This demonstrates two important things: firstly, the potential for action research to get in underneath phenomena in a way many other research methods cannot and maybe don't wish to. Secondly, how action research leads to direct, practical recommendations which may feed into further, iterative research cycles, producing more refined recommendations in turn.

In the second instance, Gray presents a case of action research – concerning the improvement of project management practices within a multinational based in Sweden – that only partially succeeded in terms of the outcomes expected. This is a useful example as it shows how different methods can be used under an action research umbrella (in this case, observation, surveys and interviews). It also illustrates the political dynamic referred to above because what worked in this case was only the training part of the initiative; the systemic improvement of project management practices did not result. This was down to a lack of involvement on the part of powerful organisational figures more equipped to change things. Thus Gray's earlier point is reinforced: action researchers must know who will be important for achieving the outcomes desired as part of the research agenda, which will always be practical in nature and so ultimately evaluated in those terms.

To return to more general themes, *Doing Research in the Business World* is well designed, and this plays favourably into its overall readability. Gray is also to be commended for covering a vast array of technical topics with a deft and lucid hand, which is no small feat. Throughout the book an admirable sense of balance is also evident. No needless shots are fired in the yawnful paradigm wars: all sides are represented; all sides fairly handled. Indeed, Gray's work itself is a maturely self-possessed and reflexive piece of research.

Practitioners especially should make use of this book. The reason is twofold. In my experience, if they are not researching on their own behalfs — say, for example, as part of a part-time Masters degree — practitioners tend to either outsource systematic research activities to consultants or, perhaps more unfortunately, see research as the sole intellectual and practical province of academics.

Whilst these perspectives may be legitimate in their own right, they are also often missed opportunities for practitioners to either properly partner other parties in the research process or to take it upon themselves to investigate their own working worlds. At worst, such perceptions of who can and should undertake research and to what ends may disempower those with genuine skin-in-the-game in terms of research outputs, those who are typically best positioned to act on the findings produced. Seen from this perspective, Gray's work is less a book than a tool for practitioners. And, to borrow a phrase from the poet Seamus Heaney, I encourage them to dig with it.

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