

Book Review

Jeff Keshen and Sylvie Perrier, eds.

Building New Bridges / Bâtir de Nouveau Ponts

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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

For many whose work involves conducting original research into diverse areas of public policy, and for many more whose work relies on reading research reports on public policy issues, preliminary questions of empirical theory and methodology are obscure and abstruse, when not actually distracting and exasperating. Internecine academic squabbles in a range of disciplines from anthropology and economics to psychology and sociology (with many variations and themes beyond and between) frequently leave non-specialists cold. Practical people want comprehensive and comprehensible results. They want reliable information and are not much concerned with the underlying conceptual schemes that sustain them.

Instead of seeking to grasp the often subtle epistemological issues at stake, some follow in the intellectual tradition of Sergeant Joe Friday. They insist that all they want are the “facts.” Others, like deer, seem frozen in the arcane language lamps of postmodernism, relativism and the “culture wars.” Recoiling from ponderous polysyllables, they flee into uncritical eclecticism — borrowing a bit of data here and a seemingly useful concept there, hoping to cobble together from diverse sources some evidence (or at least a pithy phrase) to support their projects, but abandoning any hope of adopting a consistent, rigorous approach to their studies. The results are too frequently garbled constructions made up of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory data gathering techniques that yield findings that can be taken apart and dismissed by even the most casual but critical observer.

To the Joe Fridays, the hard-headed pragmatists in thrall, whether they know it or not, to naïve positivism, I would say that there is no such thing as raw data, nor transparent, undisputed facts. All information exists within some sort of theoretical context, even if the theory is unacknowledged or even unknown.

To the second lot of soft-minded eclectics, I would say that an openness to unlimited alternatives and a willingness to “cherry pick” among competing epistemological positions, theoretical strategies and methodological tactics to suit the particularities of each research puzzle guarantees, in Marvin Harris’s words, “that [their] solutions will remain unrelated to each other by any coherent set of principles ... Rather, eclecticism is a prescription for perpetual scientific disaster: middle-range theories, contradictory theories, and unparsimonious theories without end. Open-mindedness is no excuse for empty-headedness and the material effects are policy studies and recommendations that literally make no sense.

Unfortunately, members of both groups are apt to regard the exploration of deep epistemological assumptions and technical methodological disputes as unnecessarily “philosophical,” esoteric and ultimately unnecessary. Taken too seriously, what should be expressed in an opening paragraph can easily balloon into a book wherein the author gets mired in methodological minutia, and the supposed subject of the research is never specifically addressed.

Keshan and Perrier’s collection of essays puts the lie to all such reservations and objections. *Building New Bridges* contains twenty excellent essays that should engage even the most hard-bitten “realist” and give structure to the mushiest dilettante.

There are three reasons why Keshen’s and Perrier’s work merits close attention.

First, unlike many anthologies that include essays of uneven quality, the contributors to this volume display expertise of uniform excellence and uniformly high standards of expression. Their arguments are conveyed concisely and plainly, but never with condescension. It is clear that these writers sincerely and deeply care about their subject matter. They want to inform, not impress. Even when dealing with

unfamiliar sources **such as nineteenth-century school readers and foreign consulate archives**, the attentive reader will have no trouble understanding the essence of the arguments and will surely be caught up in the exploration a fascinating assembly of social puzzles as well as an intriguing set of approaches to their solution.

Second, at a time when interdisciplinarity sometimes means little more than disjointed chatter in the futile search for a common grammar, this forum puts the meticulous work of mainly young scholars on display with formidable results; the essays reveal disparate substantive interests, but all address a single theme: How to evaluate and apply the most effective means of collecting and interpreting evidence in the pursuit of authentic knowledge and with genuinely useful results.

Third, the writers accomplish their eminently practical tasks while dealing with topics that many skeptics in our increasingly philistine times might regard as distanced from the real business of government (which is ever more oriented to the “business” of government).

Some examples:

The way in which quantitative standards influenced the innovative Toronto Building Code following the great fire of 1904;

The evolution over two centuries of anatomical models in the teaching of medicine;

The place of politics, culture and ideology in the development of school texts;

The inherent problems of “oral history”;

Surprising revelations about early radio drawn from the analysis of CBC schedules (they show how the organizational innovation of the CBC actually increased US program content).

Even the most apparently remote inquiries into, **for example, medieval produce or historical stone monuments have** important lessons to teach. Whether inquiring into immigration by examining entry documents or sorting out the implications of analyzing statistical data derived from a contemporary census, these articles provide two immediate benefits for readers, no matter if they have a pre-existing interest in the explicit subject matter. The first is a refreshing taste of subjects that might previously have been missed (I will not ignore the anatomical models in doctors’ offices or nursing schools again!). The second is the recognition that problems of understanding that I have wrestled with for over forty years are presented afresh and with good results by perusing well-written studies by practitioners of an intellectual craft, not pedants or narrow professionals constructing narratives to impress only a small circle of friends and competitors.

Had anyone suggested that I might learn something from an exposition on the study of war memorials, I would until recently have laughed. Keshen and Perrier proved me wrong.

They and their contributors have done their work in a manner that will engage the attentive skeptic, and will also persuade the thoughtful reader of the crucial importance of “theory” in the development of pragmatic, policy-oriented research. Collectively, they show clearly how the way in which we go about obtaining, interpreting and analyzing data foreshadows our results and conclusions. They make us all more aware of the critical necessity of thinking through our research strategies and designs, lest our unexplored assumptions determine our outcomes and leave us with conclusions that have fundamental flaws of which we may be only vaguely aware.

About the Author

Howard A. Doughty is Book Review Editor of *The Innovation Journal*. He teaches at Seneca College in King City, Ontario, Canada.