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Essentials of Transdisciplinary Research: Using Problem-Centred Methodologies

Patricia Leavy

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In this book, the author sets out to achieve three goals. The first is to identify and document current moves towards transdisciplinarity in research and scholarship. The second is to bring attention to the merits of adopting such approaches, with particular reference to their social justice and moral underpinnings. The third is to offer a basic guide to assist those wishing to design and undertake transdisciplinary research projects. In order to achieve these goals, the book is organised into six chapters, covering key principles (chapter 1), the emergence of transdisciplinarity (chapter 2), research design (chapter 3), community-based research practices (chapter 4), arts-based research practices (chapter 5) and finally, evaluation and future prospects (chapter 6).

In the preface, Leavy defines transdisciplinarity as “an approach to conducting social research that involves synergistic collaboration between two or more disciplines with high levels of integration between the disciplinary sets of knowledge” (p.9). This definition is extended in chapter 1, through reference to a number of key principles. These include ‘issue- or problem-centredness’, ‘transcendence’ (of disciplinary perspectives), ‘emergence’ (of new conceptual and methodological frameworks), ‘innovation’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘a holistic or synergistic approach to research’ (p.30). Leavy argues that transdisciplinarity can be understood as distinct from disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, which together make up a continuum of increasing levels of collaboration and integration between disciplines and their concepts, theories and methods.

In chapter 2, the emergence of transdisciplinary research practices is documented by exploring a number of influences from both inside and outside the academy. Inside influences include perspectives such as feminist, critical race, queer, postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial and embodiment theories, as well as the development of interdisciplinary subject fields, such as communication, gender and cultural studies. Outside influences include globalisation, justice movements and technological advancements. The increasingly complex nature of social problems in late modernity, and the moral imperative to engage the public in associated research pursuits is also considered.

Chapter 3 provides an outline of how transdisciplinary research can be designed in order to maintain an emphasis on the issue- or problem-centred nature of such research, and plan and carry out projects in a holistic and responsive way. The chapter goes through all of the core stages of the research process, including planning, devising research questions, undertaking a literature review, deciding on the division of labour amongst the team, choosing research methods (including mixed-methods, multi-methods or hybrid designs), analysis, interpretation, representation and dissemination. Much of the discussion centres on the particular challenges of working collaboratively in these contexts, as well as ensuring that the design enables the research to retain its 'useful' quality.

The next two chapters use community-based and arts-based research practices as examples where transdisciplinary research can be effective, particularly for designing problem-centred collaborations and engaging the public in dissemination of 'useful' research'. Chapter 6 then goes on to offer evaluation strategies and criteria for transdisciplinary research, in an attempt to answer critics who argue that such approaches have the potential to threaten standards of rigour. The specific criteria discussed generally stem from the initial principles outlined in the first chapter, such as flexibility, innovation, intersubjectivity, synergy and usefulness. Finally, the chapter briefly considers some of the future prospects for transdisciplinarity, in reference to issues such as academic publishing, promotion criteria and research funding.

Overall, I found the book a very good introduction to transdisciplinary research. It maintained an accessible style throughout, with summary tables of key concepts included in each chapter and relevant research examples used to illustrate the points made. The book also demonstrated internal coherence, with the main principles outlined in the first chapter continually revisited throughout the rest of the volume. This was particularly useful in the chapters on research design and evaluation, which offered excellent practical blueprints for individuals wishing to pursue these kinds of projects.

However, I did feel there were a couple of areas where the book could have been improved further. Firstly, there was a lot of emphasis on the practical 'usefulness' and social justice based nature of transdisciplinary research, when I would argue that such approaches also offer the opportunity for theoretical and 'blue skies' problem-solving to break out of disciplinary silos. Secondly, I felt there was much more scope for discussing barriers to developing transdisciplinary research, and potential approaches to tackling these, which were only briefly touched upon at the end of the book. For example, the disincentives for scholars to engage in transdisciplinarity are often based on much more than promotion prospects, encompassing issues such as professional identity and disciplinary belonging.

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