**Women in Research Methods**

Interview with Dr. Le (Betty) Zhou

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(interviewed by Jayci Robison, Ph.D. student at Oklahoma State University on 12/3/21)

1. *What initiated your interest in a multitude of quantitative research methods and thorough methodology?*

“My undergrad major was in psychology, and I was exposed to quantitative psychology as a research field. I was reading those papers, and I felt very energized, and I was very interested in that type of research. When applying to grad school, I considered both quantitative psychology and I-O psychology. Eventually, I chose I-O psychology because it’s more than just the numbers and messages written in an abstract way; you can actually see things play out substantively, which can inspire more research questions and methods. I was still interested in quantitative psychology, so I continued following the topics and methods I was interested in, and eventually started to write papers focused on those methods. And that’s how I got involved with research methods.”

1. *Can you speak to the necessity of rigorous methods within the field of management and throughout academia as a whole?*

“I think there are two roles that I'm in, and both of them require me to pay attention to methodology. First is my role as a researcher who generates research findings to contribute to the literature and guide practice. I think it's important for me to have confidence in the work I'm doing; what is the quality of the product I’m putting into the literature to contribute to other researchers’ work? My research process can potentially be used to guide practice or inspire practitioner ideas, so I think paying attention to methodology is also important in that regard. Another thing related to this perspective is the efficiency of how I do my work. Some methods do not come out of nowhere, they’re built on existing methods; maybe one is more powerful or more efficient. Knowing what’s the most cutting edge allows me to better answer my research questions.

On the flip side, I’m also a consumer of other people’s research, which will serve as the foundation for my own work. Paying attention to methodology issues allows me to assess how solid the foundation of research actually is. What’s already known, and how did we find the answer? What are some areas of research with limitations in regard to methodology? And also, what are the different types of findings we are getting from studies using different types of methods? These questions help me assess how we can collectively push a body of research forward. So, I think from both the angle of researcher generating research, and also as a consumer of other people’s research, methodology is important for collectively moving a body of knowledge forward.”

1. *Sometimes it’s difficult to explain to others what goes on in academia. How important is methodology when translating our findings to those outside of the field?*

“Based on my experience interacting with people who are not directly involved with academia – for example, when I write a digested version of my research, talk to journalists, try to explain my research to friends, or contact professionals outside of academia – methodology issues are actually front and center in regard to how we communicate our research. For example, whenever you talk about your research findings, people almost always ask you, “Among what population? What is the group you’re trying to speak to?” And then you have to think about, ‘how did I get my data?’ Oftentimes we use convenient samples, but there are also cases in which we go through a very systematic process. So, regardless of which you use, people are typically intrigued by this. Where did you get your data, what is the population like, what will your findings be relevant to? So, sampling is a methodology issue that always comes up when you try to communicate what you do to people outside of academia. People are also always curious about internal validity. They ask, “What about this explanation? Have you thought about that?” They don’t have to always use the language typical in ‘research talk,’ but it’s the same thing. They’re wondering, “Are you sure that this is a cause leading to the effect? What about these other things, have you considered them?” And so, a good researcher has already done their homework and should have thought through alternative explanations. This way, when we communicate research outside of academia, the explanation is natural.

When communicating research outside of academia, people also wonder, “How did you come up with your measure?” We often have this abstract idea or concept we are trying to study, and then, if you are doing empirical work, there is also this concrete, observable evidence you are using, and metrics you are using to quantify your abstract ideas. When we communicate with other people who are not necessarily researchers in our field, they may wonder, “Is that a good indication or reflection of the abstract idea?” And, they may have other insights. I think this is another place where methodology issues may surface.”

1. *How would you encourage early scholars who are interested in methodological issues? What specific opportunities, and with whom, might you encourage them to seek out?*

“There are different ways for junior scholars to get involved. I think one of the stereotypes is that methodologists are difficult to approach, and they are very harsh and critical. Based on my personal experience, many of them are actually very approachable and fail to live up to this stereotype. So, if someone is relatively junior and wants to get involved, they could reach out directly to a researcher who already has some experience publishing or doing work on a specific methodological topic. One suggestion I would offer is to be more specific in what you ask for in the initial email. What are the things you are thinking about? How, specifically, can the person you’re emailing provide you support? If you’re asking about a project, how do you envision it going forward? You don’t need to have a set template but having details in the initial communication helps facilitate the process. I wonder if sometimes people don’t get a response because their request was too vague, and the intended party isn’t sure where to start. So be specific in those requests. The second way to get involved is to join different groups. For example, Academy of Management has a research methods division, so attending events at conferences organized by these divisions is a great way to get to know people already doing this type of work.”

1. *How would you encourage scholars who find methodology to be intimidating and/or overwhelming?*

“I think it’s very common to feel a bit overwhelmed – this also applies to scholars who are experienced with one method but need to work with something unfamiliar – and intimidated when approaching new methodology. I want to acknowledge; I don’t think this feeling is specific to junior scholars. Maybe senior scholars hide it better, or don’t talk about what they don’t know as openly, but I think this struggle is very common. I think the first thing that can be done to alleviate this discomfort is to achieve a general understanding of the research question. What is the method that is often used in this type of research? Do you have a basic understanding at the conceptual level? In general, what does the method look like, and why? What can it achieve, and what purpose does it serve? Start with these questions rather than getting into the nitty-gritty details. I’m guessing the details are where the feelings of being overwhelmed come from. So, achieving a high-level picture of the method and its key components is helpful *before* diving into the details. Once you do dive into the details, you can tackle the technical aspects and how to actually get the method to work. But I think taking this two-steep approach may be helpful. I also think it’s helpful to learn by doing. Sometimes it may feel overwhelming to read a paper and conceptualize it in an abstract way. If you can get involved with a project that is already applying a specific method, you can observe a more experienced researcher and collaborator use this method. Then, you can attempt it and ask for feedback. This helps tremendously in getting a first-hand experience regarding how the method is applied.”

1. *What are some of the developments you foresee being relevant in regard to the future of research methodology?*

“With the development of technology and also other trends – political, social, cultural trends – going on in the workspace, we are going to have a lot more empirical research questions that require researchers to wrangle large sets of data in order to answer their questions or finish their research projects. Because of that, I think a lot of new trends within the next 10 to 20 years will be related to tools developed to handle that. For example, we hear people say the word AI, artificial intelligence, or machine learning a lot. These are popular research methods people have been using to handle larger data and answer questions related to larger data sets. Another trend is to further develop or expand traditional methods. In longitudinal research, for example, we have been using methods designed to handle only a few waves of data. But now it’s possible we are going to have data coming from many individuals or many study units with many observations. So how can we expand existing methods to handle this type of data? This is another area of methodology research I think will be very vibrant. When we have access to data, how do we determine if we are really getting better answers? This doesn’t necessarily have to be a statistical question, it can be related to how well we design our research study, and research process so we are achieving better answers. So, related to that, I this is another area of research that can also be very promising if someone is interested in methodology work.”

1. *How do you conceptualize a research methods paper? Relatedly, what constitutes a significant contribution to research methods in your mind?*

“The first part of a methodology paper is very similar to any paper we write. First, what is the question? How good are the existing answers? Why is the answer we’re exploring worth writing about? These three questions are very similar in any type of paper. Specific to a methodology paper, it usually starts with an assessment of a research method. Then, what are the available tools, and how do the tools function? Finally, why is the existing way of doing things inefficient, and what is the selling point I’m hoping to achieve? You will spend the body of the paper talking about the details of the method you are promoting, or answering the question you are attempting to answer, and then detail supporting evidence. The middle part of the paper involves answering the question asked at the beginning, while also convincing the reader your explanation is worth considering. In the discussion section, we talk about the boundaries of the work, address any limitations in scope, and provide recommendations for future research.

So, I think when I’m writing a methodologically focused paper, I don’t view it as different from any other paper in terms of its structure. I think the main thing that’s different is the middle; what’s my answer? This is grounded by evidence often derived from less conventional techniques like simulations, which is contrary to standard management papers.”

1. *In 2022, Lisa Lambert and Tina Köhler will take over as co-editors of ORM, representing the first time the journal has been led by female scholars. Can you briefly speak on the importance of increased representation throughout the area of research methods? How might we continue to encourage this representation?*

“I think it’s very encouraging news to hear Lisa and Tine will take over as a co-editors of ORM, a flagship journal in organizational research methods. Having representation at the leadership level helps show junior scholars, this is a field that’s open to anyone who is interested in doing this kind of work. I hope it becomes a signal, especially for minority students who may have previously, for various reasons, may not have considered doing this type of work. So, I think in terms of a pipeline, on the beginning end, it helps attract talent. I also think this representation is important to inspire new ideas from different perspectives. We’re humans doing research, and that’s the same for methodology work. We can be bounded by our own personal experiences, not just in terms of demographics, but also in regard to many other dimensions. This representation sends the signal that we encourage diverse views, and we embrace different ways of thinking about ‘what is methodology?’ as well as different ways to improve methodology. I think one big, general principle is not to *just* put the burden on any type of minority along any given dimension. For example, we’re talking about how there are not enough women in the research methods field; but I don’t think it’s just on the women to do the work, to increase the representation and diversity. I think we need strong allies who are willing to act and speak up. Relatedly, I want to give a special shout out to a couple of colleagues of mine I can think of off the top of my head. Larry Williams, the director of CARMA, has always been a strong ally. He makes an effort to be sure everyone feels welcomed in the community. My colleague at Minnesota, John Kammeyer-Mueller, is also a methodologist and very strong advocate for giving everyone a chance and encouraging diversity within the community. I think having allies is fundamental, especially because it spreads the burden of inclusion. Essentially, I think everyone has a role to play. Individual faculty members in our research, teaching, and service… we can open the door to people who have historically not had opportunity or access to this research community. Maybe they’re interested, but they don’t know how to go about being a part of it. I also think administrators at different academic units can play a very important role. For example, when we ask women to teach a methodology class, are we showing them the same appreciation and support as we would our male colleagues? Leaders of professional or shared interest groups can also make critical decisions with the ultimate goal of an inclusive community in mind. So, again, I think everyone has a role to play, and going back to what I said earlier, I think it’s important not to just put the burden on the minority.”