

Qualitative Psychology – a Practical Guide to Research Methods

Jonathan A. Smith (editor): **Qualitative Psychology – a Practical Guide to Research Methods**. Sage Publications Ltd. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi. Published 2003, 258 pages.

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Every year a large number of books are published that aim at offering an introduction to qualitative methods in psychology and other social sciences. Considering the sheer volume of annually published material that is intended to help beginning researchers, it would seem a difficult task to offer something new and inspiring in the field. The editor of the present volume, Jonathan A. Smith, has however managed to put into one book a remarkable collection of contributions, some of them by far surpassing my expectations. Actually, this book is much more than a practical methods book. The contributors – all recognized authorities in the field - do cover a wide range of topics and their coverage is far from superficial. Undoubtedly the main contribution of the book to qualitative methods is its description of actual step-by-step application of the various methods. Younger and less experienced researchers who are planning their first large or important project will especially welcome this. But actually, this book also offers the more experienced researchers a lot of ideas and issues to think about. Many people in the latter group can also benefit from its inspiration and practical method guidelines. At the end of each chapter, there is a literature overview with recommended sources for further reading and a comment on how the books may be of best use.

This book comes in eleven chapters with twelve contributors. In the introduction (chapter one) the editor states the main ideas behind this work. There is a discussion and a definition of qualitative psychology in general, and of how qualitative and quantitative methods are basically different. It is also pointed out that there may be certain overlap between the two, and that qualitative psychology is far from involving only a single method of doing research.

Peter Ashworth writes about the origins of qualitative psychology in the book's second chapter. He traces the beginning of scientific psychology and points out that at the core of qualitative psychology there are certain basic assumptions about the nature of man and life. The common denominator of qualitative research methods is a concern with life experiences and the interpretation and meaning of these experiences. Ashworth traces the story of the scientific study of experience; how experimental psychology treated this subject and the psychologies of William James and Wilhelm Wundt. He then goes on to describe the rejection of human experience by behaviourism and cognitivism and illustrates how these directions in psychology have limited its subject matter. By doing so they have also given up whole fields of human life as insignificant of psychological research. To name an example, behaviourists and

cognitivists are not concerned with meaning in life or with the unique life experiences of individuals. The social nature of human life was also largely disregarded. In this chapter, phenomenology and existentialism are also introduced and the contribution of idiographic psychology; G.W. Allport, G.H. Mead and G. Kelly and later social constructionism, interpretation theory and postmodernism. This chapter provides a necessary foundation for the other chapters of the book by giving a historical overview of how the “two psychologies” were separated and how they have developed since. The chapter summarizes its topic well.

Chapter 3 is titled Phenomenology and is written by Amadeo Giorgi and Barbro Giorgi. This chapter is written with great clarity and authority. The Giorgi’s have a great gift of writing distinctly and they come directly to the core issues without wasting too many words. I have read about the origins and history of phenomenology in various places but this text took me by surprise by its right-to-the-point approach. The Giorgi’s do not present phenomenology as a general solution or an “only truth” in psychology. In this chapter the issue of what constitutes a scientific psychology is taken up and explained but the main purpose of the text is to present a definite phenomenological research method that is illustrated in a step-by-step fashion. Determination of data and method are discussed as is data analysis in four basic steps and the communication of results. The chapter ends with a discussion about the nature of phenomenological research, its limitations and the possible pitfalls and vulnerabilities of the method. This chapter provides an excellent introduction to phenomenology (and to some of its basic methods like bracketing and the phenomenological reduction) and a concrete way of doing research using it. I admit that this is the only chapter in this book that I read more than once, for sheer enjoyment. Edmund Husserl is one of psychology’s *grand old men*, but his basic message is as refreshing today as it was a hundred years ago – and a must for any serious student of psychology.

Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn write about interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in chapter four. IPA aims at exploring the meaning of the personal and social world of people, and uses the phenomenological approach combined with hermeneutics, as a basic tool. There is great flexibility possible in using IPA and the method is suitable to a wide variety of research topics. There are some definite stages involved in doing an IPA analysis and the authors show them in detail. Examples of research questions are given as well as advice about how to go about constructing your own questions and deciding on a sample. As is to be expected IPA is best suited to smaller sample sizes, using purposive and selective sampling. A good exposition is made of ways to collect data from interviews using IPA, and structured and semi-structured interviews are compared. The basics of making an interview schedule, constructing questions, interviewing, analyzing and writing up the final version of the research are well presented and explained.

In chapter five, Kathy Charmaz writes about grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss¹ first presented grounded theory in a book that has long since become one of the classics of

¹ Glaser, B.G., and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

qualitative research methods. Grounded theory is one of the first things that a student of qualitative methods comes across and it is well that a chapter should be devoted to that topic in this book. Charmaz explains the key characteristics of grounded theory and describes its history in brief, then she goes on to show how it may be used for generating data and defining meanings and processes in the data. This is done with a reference to actual research projects and respondent's stories that are partially described. The issues of data coding and finding categories from the texts are described, as well as methods of sampling and writing the first draft. In short, a useful and well-written chapter but people who are planning projects of this sort should of course also read Glaser's and Strauss's book.

Narrative psychology is the topic of chapter six written by Michael Murray. This chapter is a good introduction to the narrative method in psychology, which is, to my mind, a field of considerable complexity. Murray states a great truth in the introductory sentence when he says that narratives constantly surround us during life. Almost anything can be turned into a story and the narrative or story telling is mankind's oldest method of explaining things to others and to us. As such, the narrative method should have a place of honour in the hall of qualitative methods, so to speak. However, there are problems associated with the use of the narrative method and not all researchers feel confident with this approach – maybe because it requires some narrative qualities or a natural “feeling for a good story” on the part of the researcher. Murray outlines the history of narrative psychology, defines the concept of a narrative and discusses issues of narrative identity and the social dimensions of narratives. The second part of the chapter is devoted to an exposition of a narrative research project and guidelines are given for the beginning researcher to follow. An excellent though necessarily short example is presented about the use of the narrative method in interviews with a group of women who had had operations for breast cancer. This chapter is brimming with information and ideas about narrative research and data analysis, and will without doubt encourage beginning researchers to try their hand at this interesting research method. The narrative method may well result in reports that are fun and interesting to read - a property that should not be underestimated in modern research projects!

Paul Drew presents conversation (CA) analysis in chapter seven. This chapter begins with an overview of CA and how it has developed, and some basic criteria and definitions. This overview is very useful and well written, as is the rest of the chapter. Drew then goes on to discuss the kind of data that are used in CA and the steps used in analysing the data. “The aim of CA research is to investigate and uncover the socially organized practices through which people make themselves understood, and through which they manage social activities in talk” (pp. 147-8). Finding systematic patterns in conversations is important in doing CA, and this is well introduced here. This chapter will without doubt make many of its readers interested in learning more about the world of CA analysis.

In chapter eight Carla Willig writes a highly interesting account of doing discourse analysis. Willig is a writer who has the gift of exposing things with clarity, and a lot can be gained from this chapter. The first part of the chapter is devoted to discursive psychology in general. But I liked the second part, about doing Foucauldian discourse analysis even more. Foucault

continues to have a great impact on modern researchers and writers, and the serious student of the social sciences will harvest a very important part of his education from his work. Willig does a fine job of introducing Foucauldian discourse analysis, an admittedly complicated method and hardly suitable for the beginner or fledgling researcher. Foucault is always an inspiration, and when Willig focuses on him the result is bound to be interesting.

Sue Wilkinson's chapter nine on Focus Groups is good and brimming with interesting information. She discusses the appropriate and the less appropriate uses of this approach well at the beginning of this chapter and then presents a detailed way of doing focus group research. The data analysis presented here is content analysis and discursive analysis. The focus group method is quite special in many ways, for example the researcher does generally not ask questions off each person in the group but acts as a "moderator" who keeps the discussion going around certain themes or issues. The interaction between people in the group in a naturalistic setting is of main importance here. This method is clearly best suited for people who have good social skills and like to work in and with groups. Wilkinson's writing style is good and her handling of her subject matter thorough.

Peter Reason writes about cooperative inquiry in chapter ten. Cooperative inquiry is a research method that departs from the traditional in a fundamental way, because the participants are considered co-researchers, influencing all the stages of research. As Reason explains in the beginning sentence of this chapter, psychology has traditionally separated the researcher and the researched, the "...subject and the object in search for objective truth" (p. 205). Participatory research – cooperative inquiry - finds fundamental faults with this position and tries to counter them by its unique approach to method. In this chapter Reason explains the way of thinking that is basic to this approach; the epistemological grounding and the logics of this kind of research. Above all, cooperative inquiry is a human process and a science of persons where there is an "...emergence of self-aware, critical community of inquiry nested within a community of practice" (p. 211). Using this method poses many fascinating challenges, but in my opinion, this method is hardly suitable for beginners, they should start with something less ambitious.

Jonathan A. Smith writes the final chapter, about validity and qualitative psychology. This chapter is four pages and gives only elementary introduction to its subject matter. The serious student must then go on to address this important subject that must be studied separately and at depth. I find this short chapter a bit out of place here but one could also say that it is useful to remind beginning researchers about the importance of the validity issue.

If I were to edit a book like this one, what would I have done differently? I would have liked to see a final chapter where the methods presented were compared and their similarities, differences and overlap clearly drawn up, as far as that is possible. This should preferably have been done using a combination of text and tables or some schematic presentation of the methods. Such a chapter should also have discussed the kinds of research questions most suitable to each method. A chapter like that could have prevented an impression that choice of qualitative method was largely arbitrary. Experienced researchers know that the choice of

method is important. It must not only serve the purpose of the research project as well as possible; it must also fit the personality of the researcher.

After reading this book I feel optimistic about the future of qualitative inquiry. Regarding the future development of qualitative research methods, I would like to cite Jonas Salk² who wrote in another context “We may have as much to learn from our imaginations as from past experience”. There is no single method that can be called *the* qualitative method, nor can we be certain that we have as yet found the best method for all kinds of research problems. But there seems to be no shortage of researchers who have a great gift of imagination and invention in the qualitative field. I recommend this book for the purpose and the audience that it was written for. It offers both an inspiration to do research and a detailed guide to the research methods that it presents.

(Ban Nongpai, N.E. Thailand, September 2003)

² Salk, Jonas (1972). *Man Unfolding*. Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London (p. 144).