

Qualitative Research: Three Books Questioning What to Do and How to Do It

- Alvesson, Mats and Kaj Sköldbberg (2000): **Reflexive Methodology. New Vistas for Qualitative Research.** Sage. 319 pages
- Hollway, Wendy and Tony Jefferson (2000): **Doing Qualitative Research Differently. Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method.** Sage. 166 pages
- Silverman, David (ed.) (1997): **Qualitative Research. Theory, Method and Practice.** Sage. 262 pages

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As the current discourse on social science research tends to move beyond the strict dichotomies between objectivism vs. relativism, quantitative vs. qualitative methodologies, and hard vs. soft data, we are moving toward a new era within the social sciences. Common comprehension of the object, the method and the findings of our research are questioned. The old-fashioned stances amongst and between the different schools of technological, hermeneutic, critical and postmodern methodologies are conceived as problematic. And we are confronted with a call for a systematic and critical self-reflection.

Recent books are commenting on this current shift while they challenge our most common beliefs on “what-to-do-and-how-to-do-it” within the social sciences. Three of these books are Alvesson & Sköldbberg’s *Reflexive Methodology*, Hollway & Jefferson’s *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* and Silverman’s *Qualitative Research*.

Reflexive Methodology

Alvesson & Sköldbberg promote what they identify as a “reflexive approach”. Following the line starting from Anthony Giddens’ “double hermeneutics”, via critical theory’s “triple hermeneutics”, they introduce what they name “quadruple hermeneutics”. The point is to emphasize the necessity of crossing the traditional boundaries between technological, hermeneutic, critical and postmodern research strategies. The argument is that each of these confined approaches necessarily will limit our understanding. And that true reflexivity will occur only when the different research methodologies are played against and reflected in one another.

Alvesson & Sköldbberg’s request for a reflexive methodology is a call for metatheoretical considerations, breadth and variation in interpretations, and a creative and extensive approach. But it is primarily a call for an appropriate attention to the researcher’s role of constructing both the object and the data of social science research, and the political, ideological and ethical issues that follows. “Reflection means interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s

own authority, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author".

As such, this book does not present any simple or clear-cut rule or procedure. But, while avoiding the pitfalls of an abstract philosophical discussion on the one hand and a narrow focus on the research techniques on the other, the authors give a theoretically well-informed approach to social research. And point at the need for an open-minded, creative relation between theoretical framework and empirical research. Thereby, Alvesson & Skoldberg highlight a crucial ingredient within social research: "The researcher's judgement, intuition, ability to 'see and point something out', as well as the consideration of a more or less explicit dialogue – with the research subject" (p. 248).

Doing Qualitative Research Differently

In this book Hollway & Jefferson offer a theorization of what they call the "defended" subjects of research. While using examples from their own research project, they show how the interviewees tend to protect themselves against the interviewers' rationally driven questions-and-answers approach. Therefore, most qualitative interviews often generate depleted data. And thereby produce and confirm prevalent stereotypic conceptions about the social agents.

The alternative is "narrative interviewing". A method based on the assumption that the subject is a psychosocial construct, and that the data generated are fundamentally relational. In other words, that the research results are products of the social relations between the interviewer and the interviewee, between the inner and the outer sphere, and between the social and the material world. This critical realistic approach is the starting-point for Hollway & Jefferson's theoretical, methodological and ethical discussions on qualitative research. And the foundation for their interview method, which mirrors "an enriched, more complex, nuanced and, arguably, more humane and ethical view of the human subject" (p. 156).

Hollway & Jefferson therefore believe the narrative interview to make a difference when it comes to the knowledge that the social science research is capable of producing. First, the method is advocated as more humane, since it is based on the principles of honesty, sympathy and respect. Second, as more 'true', as it is capable of capturing more of the complexity of the subject's life-stories. Consequently, the method is held to be more powerful when it comes to understanding peoples' experiences through their own meaning-frame.

As the narrative method is based on a critical-realistic stance, Hollway & Jefferson want to stress the subject's relationship to reality, the importance of a collective conscience, and the post-rational unitary subject. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge the linguistic turn to be valuable in questioning the common idea of the transparent, unmediated self. Consequently, this book may be read as a contribution to the common discourse trying to bridge the gap between different traditions and research strategies within the social sciences, as the authors allow for the complex, ambiguous and paradoxical nature of social facts. As they say: "We hope that our approach stops short of throwing out the baby of truth with the bathwater of

certainty, and can hang on to sociological insights without reducing our subjects to merely social determinants” (p. 156).

Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice

The theme of this book, edited by David Silverman, can be summed up in one question: How to make our ideas clear? The articles, written by a team of eminent social science researchers committed to rigorous qualitative research, deal with a broad specter. Such as ‘observation’, ‘textual analysis’, ‘interviews’, ‘audio and video analysis’, ‘validity’ and ‘addressing social problems’. The issues at stake are the requirement to extend our traditional comprehension of qualitative research, the need for building bridges between different traditions rather than fighting internal battles, and the social mission of the social sciences. As such, this book is a treasury of insights and a helpful companion to qualitative research within the new era.

Despite, or rather due to, their divergent theoretical starting points, both Lindsay Prior’s and Jonathan Potter’s articles are sound examples of the extended comprehension of qualitative research. On the one hand, Lindsay Prior questions the domain of the knowing subject. By drawing on Durkheim and Mauss’ classical text on ‘Primitive Classification’ and Foucault’s ‘The Archeology of Knowledge’, he points at how our categories of thought are reflected in and constituted through concrete aspects of the social world. “Objects that cannot speak”, such as concrete artifacts or social practices, will therefore carry important messages. And the reference to a knowing subject is often superfluous.

On the other hand, Jonathan Potter focuses on the knowing subject. Or in other words, the knowing subject that is unwilling to know. By analyzing television interviews with Princess Diana and Salman Rushdie, he demonstrates an elegant way of doing discourse analysis from an existential-psychological point of view. This way of analyzing ‘naturally occurring talk’ generates data that goes behind conscious attitudes and observable social behavior. Thereby, Potter reveals how it is possible to point at the ways in which the individual speakers disavow what is at stake.

Gale Miller and Michael Bloor’s articles are examples on respectively a way of building bridges and the social mission of social science research. Miller invites a fruitful dialogue between ethnography, conversation analysis and a Foucaultian discourse analysis. While using the data generated by discursively oriented ethnographers as a starting point, Miller points at what each of these research traditions have in common. And how they, while they are played against and reflected in one another, may provoke a set of fascinating research questions. Bloor’s article deals with a dilemma that concerns most social science researchers: The mission of the social sciences and their ability to address social problems. Bloor shows how this issue is part of a broader debate about the epistemological status of social research “... about whether value neutrality can and should remain a constructive principle” (p. 235). Here, the symbolic power of the social sciences is an important dilemma. Nevertheless, Bloor claims that social science research actually has a social mission in contributing to reflective social practice.

In the final chapter, David Silverman presents arguments for what he calls ‘an aesthetic of social research’. Drawing upon Polyani, Popper and Wittgenstein, he argues for “... a passionate commitment to a minimalist aesthetic for social science which celebrates clarity and rigour” (p. 240). However, clarity does not imply a disconnection from the social world. On the contrary, clarity within social science reports and an economy in use of concepts, are the basis for communication with a wider community. And may prevent the dangerous pitfalls of symbolic power and intellectual dogmatism. Therefore, Silverman’s postscript may be read as an excellent commentary on the different contributions in this anthology. And an intelligible contribution to the current discourse on social science research.