Towards a Pragmatist Stance:
The Craft of Doing and Interpreting Qualitative Research

David Silverman (2001). **Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text, and Interaction** (2 edition) Sage, London

Martin W. Bauer, George Gaskell (Editors) (2000). **Qualitative Researching With Text, Image and Sound: A Practical Handbook** Sage, London

Book Review by Ph.D. student *Peter Musaeus*, Institute of Psychology, Aarhus University

Many people have found qualitative research difficult because *interpretation* of the data was difficult. Therefore it is most welcome with informed accounts on how to analyse qualitative data.

Silverman's book specifically deals with interpreting qualitative data whereas the book edited by Bauer and Gaskell contains sections on both collecting and interpreting qualitative data. But given that fieldwork starts at home and interpretation of qualitative data must be viewed in context (e.g. with epistemology and how the data were collected) it can be claimed that both books deal with the same key topics. The two reviewed books both criticise the view that the essence of qualitative research lies in unstructured, explorative data gathering, empathy, or that particular political positions determine what constitute good research. Hence the reader/qualitative researcher is advised against believing that everything collected is important and that the experience (of the subjects or for that matter the researcher) is equal to authenticity.

Silverman
Silverman is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at University of London. He is the author of numerous acknowledged books and journal articles.

The book "*Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text, and Interaction*" was originally published in 1994. The second edition has been updated in terms of references, clarity, and a new chapter on visual images. According to Silverman the second edition takes account of the flood of qualitative research in the 1990s and the interest in qualitative research outside sociology and anthropology for instance in psychology. Indeed this is reflected in many valuable references and examples from the intersection of these three social sciences (e.g. to Lucy Suchman and Roland Barthes).

The book reflects the theoretical background of its author by focusing on *ethnomethodology*, which seeks to describe the methods that people use in doing social life. The book describes the many pitfalls in doing field research such as the influence of *gender*, *age*, *social class*, and

identity. Qualitative researchers sometimes forget *document analysis* whereas this book devotes an entire chapter on texts. Silverman is scholarly and well informed on practically all aspects of qualitative research. The book is a sober and yet personal account, which purveys much genuine enthusiasm for producing and consuming qualitative research.

The book is lucidly written and makes good use of examples of transcripts and interpretations. It contains clear summaries of key points and recommended reading after each chapter. It is quite easy to use and contains templates/ procedures to apply when carrying out qualitative research. However a few chapters can seem a bit lengthy in trying to cover all essential topics. For instance the book covers yet another (by no means thorough) discussion on *positivism*. Some minor editorial changes could make the book (even) better e.g. by getting rid of a few idiosyncratic repetitions (e.g. "my favourite philosopher Wittgenstein"). Furthermore the book is richly packed with student exercises, whose worth can be questioned with respect to relevance, actual utility, and source of inspiration. This does not mean that the book is not good - on the contrary. This book is state of the art and by means of its balance and breadth it makes a very fine introductory textbook.

Bauer and Gaskell

Martin Bauer is reader of social psychology at London School of Economics (LSE) where George Gaskell is professor. The contributors to the book come from various European universities e.g. from Great Britain, Austria, and Germany.

The book is intended to be a *practical handbook*. It exemplifies the "LSE approach", which focuses on procedures and good practice rather than "epistemological obfuscations". In spite of its fear of theoretical muddle the handbook contains interesting theoretical discussions.

The book introduces the term *corpus* referring to the material, which is determined in advance by the analyst and on which work is done. *Corpus construction* is defined as the process of collecting materials in qualitative research. The book goes on to describe various ways to analyse and ask questions to this corpus such as *saturation* (the process of selection of text or interviewers is stopped when it does not add anything significant), *size* of corpus, *relevance*, homogeneity etc.

The contributions span a wide range of approaches ranging from *semiotics* of still pictures to *analysis of noise and music* and *computer assisted analysis*. Most contributors are psychologists but include a historian and a linguist thus giving the book a *multidisciplinary* character. Hence the book contains bridges to seemingly unrelated areas. For instance there is a chapter on *"bemetology"* (derived from "behavioural meteorology") introduced under the premise that psychology could benefit from collecting data in the same manner as meteorology. The ideas of bemetology seem rather far fledged at first glance, but from the discussion of empirical laws it derives some interesting implications for doing and understanding fieldwork. Furthermore there are contributions on issues connected with experimental design in cognitive science such as *priming* the subject (focusing the attention of a respondent on the issue) and using *episodic interviews*. A less vivid but perhaps more convincing chapter on how to construct a research corpus is a contribution by Gaskell on individual and group interviewing. This chapter includes examples and is readily applicable to

analysis. Another fine chapter is about narrative interviewing and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology and how to analyse its "corpus".

The book may serve as a handbook in the sense that it can be very inspiring for casting different shadings and lighting on qualitative researching. Few readers will not learn something new by reading this book. Whether it is particularly practical is another matter. The great strength of the book is its diversity but is also its weakness when it has to be used practically (as a search device, a handbook) under time constraints when planning or interpreting a given line of qualitative inquiry.

Comparison

Both books cover most of the classical analytical approaches for texts: *Content analysis*, *argumentative analysis*, *discourse analysis*, *analysis of naturally occurring talk*, and *semiotic analysis*. Bauer and Gaskell go to greater length with interpretation of image and sound than Silverman. On the other hand Silverman does a better job with the chosen material and in summarising the main points and explicating his own theoretical stance. Silverman makes an important point that techniques for interpreting qualitative data are not worth much without a firm theoretical stance on which to interpret the data. Both books bring this issue to the fore but could easily have dwelt more upon it.

To summarise the book by Silverman is preferably read before going ahead with doing qualitative research and the one by Bauer and Gaskell is better consulted later on specific items. The two books share outlook by viewing the epistemological clashes between qualitative and quantitative research as misguided and unproductive. The authors perceive qualitative research to be playing a significant role in social science, without falling for the temptation to promise more than can be kept (e.g. "qualitative research gives voice to the oppressed", "qualitative research need not worry about structured approaches"). Thus the books reflect a move away from a post-modern credo of "anything goes" towards a more pragmatist methodology and epistemology.