

Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology

Mary A. Kopala and Lisa Suzuki (Editors) (1999): **Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology** Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks. London. New Delhi. (237 pages.)

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This book's title, *Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology*, makes one think of many and different things. First, methods of any kind are, of course, the cornerstones of research. As such, they must be suitable to the researchers' aims. Second, there is the question of the use of methods in psychological therapy. Methods used for therapeutic purpose must be in line with the needs of the individuals and groups that a therapist tries to help. Third, there is what I would like to call the theoretical and scientific angle of methods and methods theory. Within this field, we have topics such as the origins and development of methods and the philosophical bases of various methodologies. Does method always have to be based on theory? Not necessarily, since a method may simply be based on experience. In psychology, however, this is a rarity. As a science, psychology has primarily relied on methods that are based on theories, which are in turn based on different philosophical schools. For a long time, psychological science was split up into the two main fields of qualitative and quantitative approaches. That is still true today, but time has healed many of the 'wounds' that resulted from the often heated debates between the two camps. In our times, we see that the two approaches have tended towards fusion rather than more fission. Psychological science and practice has been strengthened by the developments that resulted from this process.

People working within the qualitative methods field in psychology have long realized that there is a need for a common front and consensus about basic issues. Finding a common front has not been easy. The concept of validity in research is a good example. Qualitative researchers have been faced with a dilemma with regard to the definition of validity, because followers of the postmodern school argue that there is no one truth. Following this line of thinking, many truths coexist and life is a multitude of meanings, all equally valid. One basic dilemma that qualitative research faces is the tension within its own field between many and different methodologies and schools of thought. One could say that rivalry between these schools has now more or less replaced the old qualitative-quantitative quarrel. These tensions are fruitful because they lead to new ways of thinking, new methods, and new approaches.

Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology covers all this, and much more, well. The book is a good source of information about widely different topics within the general scope of qualitative methodology. Although published several years ago (1999) it is still relevant. It contains seventeen short chapters within a limited space of 237 pages. One would expect that so many chapters about distinct issues, within a space of only 237 pages would make the discussion

somewhat superficial, which is occasionally true. But the book's broad scope makes up for this and on the whole, this book offers a lot more than one would expect.

In Section 1, five writers address the topic of 'Foundational Issues in Qualitative Methods'. The first chapter is written by David L. Rennie and is titled 'Qualitative Research: A Matter of Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge.' This chapter is interesting because it gives the reader an overview of the history and development of qualitative thinking in research. It describes hermeneutics as a foundation of qualitative methodology, the issue of bracketing, Pierce's theory of interference, and rhetoric, and its association with hermeneutics. In his conclusion, Rennie makes an attempt at generalizing hermeneutics as a basis for qualitative research and the implications this has for the issue of validation, admittedly an issue of primary importance in qualitative research.

In chapter 2, Lisa Tsoi Hoshmand writes about 'Locating the Qualitative Research Genre'. This chapter takes up the issues addressed by Rennie in the first chapter and Hoshmand points out that it has been difficult for qualitative researchers to 'forget a unified proposal' because of philosophical and procedural differences. Hoshmand attempts to make a synthesis of qualitative research 'by viewing it in terms of the values, purposes, and collective agency of the communities of research practitioners who exercise particular kinds of intentionality in implementing particular kinds of research agendas' (p. 15). Her main point is that activities that generate knowledge should be placed both in an intellectual and a value context, and also in a broader, normative context that includes social judgment. This chapter is informative and its message is clear. However, many things could be said in a simpler way here by avoiding the embellishment of unnecessary professional jargon.

Elisabeth Merrick writes about 'An Exploration of Quality in Qualitative Research: Are "reliability and "Validity" Relevant?' This is the book's third chapter and it offers a relevant introduction to the topics of validity, reliability, trustworthiness, reflexivity, and representation. Merrick takes a post positivist position and stresses the necessity of developing new criteria for validity and reliability in qualitative research. During the past few years, much effort has been made to state or formulate universal criteria, which qualitative researchers could agree on, and considerable progress has been made. This is an attempt at legitimization of qualitative research according to academic standards. From a postmodern position, one would argue that many truths exist side by side and that it is impossible to find or develop universal criteria for qualitative research. Merrick gives several examples of how a researcher can substantiate his or her research in the face of positivist criticism. In the conclusion, Merrick rightly says of validity and reliability that 'these terms, even redefined, are insufficient to cover the multitude of complex issues involved in discussing evaluations of quality' (p. 35).

Daniel Sciarra addresses 'The Role of the Qualitative Researcher' in chapter 4. This chapter is well written and clear. There is a nice discussion about qualitative and quantitative research, positivism, idealism and the relationship between the investigator and the investigated. The differences of role of a qualitative and quantitative researcher are well drawn up and examples are given of the by-now-well-known onlooker versus actor, and the expert versus learner

approaches. The same can be said of the discussion about Sciarra's discussion of a researcher's detachment versus involvement. Sciarra says of qualitative researchers that they, 'by lifting the veil on others, are also lifting the veil on themselves' (p. 46). The important thing is the issue of 'maintaining a proper boundary between themselves and their participants' and how that boundary can be negotiated. I am not in agreement with Sciarra when he writes that the choice between qualitative and quantitative methods is usually made with a reference to pragmatic, technical, or philosophical reasons. I would add emotional and personal reasons. Sciarra forgets that people may simply believe in this or that methodological approach, almost in a religious way, but they may use philosophical or other arguments to justify their choice of method. People involved in teaching also know that students sometimes - or often - choose a certain research method because they believe that it is simple and does not involve excessive work or preparation.

Joseph G. Ponterotto and Ingrid Grieger write about 'Merging Qualitative and Quantitative Perspectives in a Researcher Identity' in chapter 5. This chapter is the last one of the book's first section, and it summarizes and adds to the issues that were addressed in the first four chapters. The merging of qualitative and quantitative designs is an interesting issue. Presently, there is much interest in precisely this approach in many Asian universities. The reason why this is interesting to many people is that using fundamentally different approaches to address a single research question may occasionally yield unexpected and interesting results. Ponterotto and Grieger try to show how one can aim at a 'merged research identity' by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. They discuss key words and terms, and tensions between qualitative and quantitative methods are explored. Then they go on to advocate a 'symbiosis between qualitative and quantitative methods in a merged research identity'. This chapter ends with a discussion about some of the major issues involved in using a double paradigm research approach within a single study. Ponterotto and Grieger offer an interesting 'road map for developing a merged research identity' here, which will, without doubt, be useful for people who want to make use of a combined qualitative and quantitative design.

The book's second part addresses issues associated with 'practical foundations for conducting qualitative research'. This section starts with a chapter on ethics in qualitative research by Cori Cieurzo and Merle A. Keitel. The writers use participant observation and in-depth interviewing as a background against which they discuss the ethics problem of research. The chapter contains useful general information and tidbits for thought. It is concluded that it is impossible to establish general rules that apply to all facets of doing research of this kind 'because of the wide range of issues that can emerge specific to each study'. The issue of potential harm done by research is also stressed, as well as the danger that a researcher's personal experience, presence, experience, and biases may affect research findings.

Patricia O'Brien Libutti's chapter 7 is focused on an important issue, namely 'The Internet and Qualitative Research.' Much development has taken place in this field since this chapter was written, and from a technical point of view, it is not up to date. The information given here is useful, however, because it offers food for thought. Issues such as ethics, informed consent,

privacy, and copyright are briefly discussed. Some thought is given to the possible future implications that the information revolution will have on academic work.

In chapter 8, Sally D. Stabb writes about 'Teaching Qualitative Research in Psychology.' Stabb presents an interesting account of her teaching experiences in this field, which is useful because many of the readers of this book will probably be involved with teaching or instruction. Stabb describes how she teaches her course in qualitative research, and explains why she does it in this particular way. Students' comments are also presented as well as the course syllabus. This chapter is good and I definitely recommend it to people who are planning or teaching a course in this field. Stabb's very personal point of view makes this chapter even more interesting than if it were more detached.

Constance T. Fischer's chapter (chapter 9) is titled 'Designing Qualitative Research for Publication'. This chapter is perhaps one of the most useful in this book from a practical point of view. It contains well-written and clear guidelines about what to do and what not to do and what to expect. Issues such as the editor's perspective, background preparation, disciplined presentation, and collegiality are very useful. I found the section on 'Anticipating Misunderstandings' very informative, as well as the discussion about methods, voice, contexts, procedures, and alternative representation of findings. The serious reader should only use this chapter as an introduction to this important field, but it is the best short introduction to it that I have seen to date.

Part III is concerned with the very relevant topic of 'Qualitative Research in a Cultural Context'. Lisa A. Suzuki, Maria Prendes-Lintel, Lauren Wertlieb, and Amena Stallings' chapter 10 is titled 'Exploring Multicultural Issues Using Qualitative Methods'. The aim of this chapter is to show how qualitative methods 'provide an appropriate means to examine multicultural settings and diverse populations'. Lived experiences and meanings of events are at the basis of qualitative inquiry, and exploring them within one's own culture is one thing. To go into these issues in other and very different cultures is something quite different and probably not advisable for beginners. This chapter, although short, gives some leads that the interested leader can follow and is, in some ways, quite original.

In chapter 11, Nancy Salkin Asher and Kenneth Chavinson Asher describe experiences and considerations associated with a research project about lesbian women and body image. Their focus is in methodological issues, and the writers show how they tackled them during the project. This chapter is a good example of how a description of one's own experiences during a qualitative project can be helpful to other researchers, especially when using an interview method. During the project, the researchers discovered many unexpected things, and learned that their original conception of main issues were different from what they had expected. The original labeling and categorizing that a researcher starts out with may often be deficient. From one point of view, the whole process of qualitative inquiry is a learning process, during which a person may have to change his or her whole view of the phenomena under investigation.

'Friendship Patterns Among Urban Adolescent Boys - A Qualitative Account' is the title of chapter 12, written by Niobe Way and Kerstin Pahl. The authors' 'present findings from a qualitative study with adolescent boys that reveals the ways that semi structured interviews detect relational processes undetectable with more established and more accepted quantitatively based methods' (p. 145). Niobe and Way present their research in a thorough and interesting manner, giving an example of a good qualitative research design. A chapter such as this definitely has its place in a book of this kind. The research topic addressed is a very relevant question in the field of a developmental psychology, namely the suitability of using qualitative methods to investigate developmental processes. Freud and Piaget were pioneers, one could justly say, when it came to the use qualitative methods. Both are acknowledged giants in the history of psychology. But both of them came under the positivist attack of having problems with validity.

The book's fourth part is focused on the use of qualitative research in a therapeutic context. This field is probably of most interest to clinical psychologists, but others may also benefit from reading about it. The whole issue of qualitative research in psychotherapy is of vast dimensions, and great complexity. Nowadays, psychologists can only hope to get to know some part of it to any real depth, and only following up on recent developments is in itself not a light undertaking. Chapter 13, written by Joy M. Tanji, bears the title 'Capturing the Process of Family Therapy as Social Meaning Construction'. Tanji presents an in-depth discussion of paradigmatic and methodological considerations that apply within the field of family therapy. Many important things are taken up for discussion here, for example therapy as social construction, methodological rigor, debriefings, participant observation, triangulation, and relational ethics. People working with family therapy are certain to find this interesting, especially those who plan to do research in the field or want to understand how it can be carried through.

Chapter 14 is titled 'Using a Qualitative Method to Study Clinical Supervision - What is Effective Clinical Supervision?' The writers, Virginia O'Brien and Mary Kopala, take up a very important subject, the power relations that exist between junior and senior members in a clinical supervisory relationship. The issue of power and authority during a clinical research process come to the surface as dilemmas and uncertainties arise. This is a well-written and important chapter.

In chapter 15 in this section of the book is focused on the role of a feminist researcher in a research project that aims at exploring lesbians' supportive and unsupportive experiences of therapy. The author, Michelle Maher, takes a broad view of this topic and includes considerations regarding the researcher-participant relationship and the need for social change. It is interesting to read about how certain aspects of feminist research are provided and integrated into the therapeutic process. Maher concludes that 'Feminist qualitative research offers an alternative to how the U.S. dominant culture and the culture in some research circles today value relationships' (p. 196).

The final section of the book, 'Qualitative Methods in Action Research and Evaluation' contains two chapters. Chapter 16, written by John O'Neill, Barbara B. Small, and John Strachan under the title 'The use of Focus Groups within a Participatory Action Research Environment.' In this chapter, the writers take up a very important matter, the issues surrounding employment for people who have contracted HIV or AIDS. It seems natural to use the focus group method for this purpose, and several good studies have seen the light of day in the past few years concerned with this topic. This chapter is mostly concerned with describing issues that arose during the research process using focus groups, and how the focus group can change and influence the original research agenda. The findings of the study had implications for future research and program design, and the mechanics of running focus groups is explained in some detail.

Leo Goldman's chapter 17 is titled 'Qualitative Research in Program Evaluation'. This chapter is written in a very precise and concrete style, and has much to offer. Goldman asks many questions here that are of fundamental importance to evaluation processes, both general and specific. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are compared; the issue of subjectivity is taken up, as well as qualitative methods in action research and evaluation. The core of the chapter gives an example of how methods and techniques can be used in qualitative assessment. Goldman concludes that 'Perhaps the one point to be emphasized is that, over and over in the evaluation studies mentioned, qualitative methods such as observations and interviews, offered facts and insights that would not have emerged from quantified data from tests, questionnaires, and other sources (p. 223).

This book, although several years old, is still relevant, because it offers an introduction to all the topics that it addresses. I find it difficult, however, to give it a definite place within the academic curriculum. Some chapters are well suited for undergraduate students, while others are written at a more advanced level. But the reader who wants a good and a general introduction to the field of qualitative methods will benefit from reading it. What are the strengths and the weaknesses of this book? Its strength is the broad coverage of topics. It is indeed surprising that the editors have managed to address so many and so different topics within the space allocated to them. On the other hand, short presentation must inevitably suffer from lack of depth.