

Qualitative Research in Practice

Sharan B. Merriam and Associates: *Qualitative Research in Practice. Examples for Discussion and Analysis.* Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Company. San Francisco, CA, 2002. (439 pages).

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The steady stream of new books that focus on qualitative research bears witness to the continuing strong interest in the field. The variety of topics seems to be almost endless but the general tendency during later years has been on emphasizing the practical side of doing research. Books that have taken a purely theoretical and philosophical stance on the subject of qualitative inquiry are not very numerous. This is understandable because theory is best understood in the light of practical examples. Theory and philosophy are of course the cornerstones that any research method rests on, but it can be argued that the “real-world” importance of theory lies in its consequences for practice. The novice student of qualitative research methods faces a multitude of possibilities and a vast array of different research approaches when deciding on the method for his first projects. For most people, the interview method holds great attraction, and is therefore chosen. Much published qualitative research today relies on a combination of interviews and other methods.

One significant change that has occurred during the last few years is the realization that a researcher should not forget his or her personality, attitudes beliefs and life situation as a significant factor of the research process. A person doing research is affected by the experience, which may often be a factor affecting personal growth. The realization that research may have personal as well as other implications that far outweigh its original aim - i.e. to acquire and contribute to knowledge and increase one's skills as a researcher - is widespread in qualitative research methods publications today.

This is a fortunate development which bears witness to the many unexpected sides of doing qualitative research in the social sciences. This is also a great step in the direction of emancipation, a step away towards freedom from the limitations of positivist research paradigms. At the same time, the qualitative researcher must carry great responsibility, because increased freedom and responsibility go hand in hand.

The nature of qualitative inquiry is such that it may lead to drastic changes – even life changes - for any researcher as well as for the other people who participate in a research project. Qualitative inquiry is a catalytic method that is often focused on people's basic beliefs. It is only to be expected that following a serious and in-depth interview about the meaning of life, for example, that people

may re-evaluate their current life situation with all the consequences that this entails. The increased discussion during later years about the ethics of research shows that this is a problem that is taken seriously. Still, the main focus is primarily on how qualitative research may affect the life of the researcher, a classic topic in ethnography that is now being extended to all other avenues of qualitative research. Even without much involvement in the practice of research, a student is bound to be affected by the postmodern school of thought that has been pervasive in qualitative circles for years. If one accepts the postmodern way of looking at life, then one's outlook and world view will change accordingly. The core of the matter is that personal experience – the very heart of qualitative research – is a catalyst for personal change and growth for all people involved. This has perhaps been best realized by feminist researchers who have taken giant steps using research as an agenda of social change. There is a strong undercurrent here of what can only be called a craving for a revolution against the hypocrisy of many established social values and norms with regard to doing social research. The book reviewed here, *Qualitative Research in Practice*, by Sharan B. Merriam and associates, discusses these aspects of practical qualitative research as well as a myriad of other interesting and highly relevant topics in the field of qualitative inquiry.

In the preface to this book, S. B. Merriam writes that it is not intended to be a textbook on qualitative research in the usual sense but should be used as a supplement along with other texts. This is first and foremost a workbook in qualitative research, a book that seeks to give advice by showing examples from other people's research projects. As such, it holds much value for students who are designing or working on their research projects. It is also an introduction to the nature of qualitative research in general, and this makes it broader in scope and more useful to a broad range of potential readers.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, there are two overview chapters, the first containing a general introduction to qualitative research and how it differs from positivist research. In the second chapter, there is a focus on the evaluation of qualitative research. It also contains a checklist to be used by the reader to be considered when evaluating the quality of his or her project, as well as a table of strategies that are aimed at improving reliability and validity in research projects.

In part two, this book contains a collection of sixteen articles accompanied with the writer's reflections on his or her experiences while being engaged in doing research. This is beneficial because it makes the articles more personal and interesting and the reader stays in closer touch with the writer while the trial and error progress of various projects is described and discussed.

S.B. Merriam makes some general conclusions about important aspects of doing qualitative research in the book's final chapter. The first conclusion is that in order for a qualitative project to succeed, the researcher must be genuinely engaged and interested in the research topic. What we have here is the psychological factor of personal motivation. It is very possible that students

sometimes undertake doing a research project that they are not actually interested in, and only design and carry a project through because it is a mandatory part of some university course. The advice here is that the student should look for a research topic that he or she is actually curious about, a topic that holds a personal meaning. This obvious factor may be neglected, and therefore it is emphasized here. A second thing is the fact that doing qualitative research is a source of personal learning about ourselves as much as about the actual research topic. Thirdly, Merriam points out that nothing can substitute for the experience of carrying out a qualitative research project. It is not enough to understand theoretically how to carry it out; we must in this case learn by doing. Merriam also states that it is often helpful to share the research project with a second person during all its stages, because the inspiration of others can often be helpful. It is also good to have a second person to discuss problems and get feedback and opinions about difficult facets of research, when important decisions have to be made. This advice may seem obvious to experienced researchers, but the beginner may avoid serious pitfalls by taking them to heart.

The first chapter addresses the nature of qualitative research and explains what is involved in the term. The difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches is outlined and different approaches within the qualitative paradigm are outlined. The basics in qualitative research designs are presented. Among the issues of this chapter are phenomenology, grounded theory, case studies, ethnography, narrative analysis, critical qualitative research and post-modern research. There is an outline on writing up research problems, sample selection, data collection, analysis and writing of the final report. These topics are addressed and described in a straight – to – the – point way, without going into them in much depth, but the reader is advised to look for more information in the various sourcebooks listed at the end of the chapter.

The second chapter is titled *Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research*. It looks into the issue of what to look for when evaluating qualitative research and steps to take in order to ensure good research quality. There is a good discussion of internal validity, reliability, generalizability and ethical issues. The advice given on these issues is sobering and makes the student think twice before starting on a project with all the implications this has for what must follow.

Part two of the book contains the sixteen articles presenting qualitative research. Chapters three to six are collected under the heading “Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research.” Sharan B. Merriam writes chapter three about “How Cultural Values Shape Learning in Older Adulthood: The Case of Malaysia.” The purpose of this research was to understand how non-Western cultural values shape learning in older adulthood in Malaysia. This is an interesting chapter and it shows by its example how a good qualitative research project can be carried through. Merriam’s treatment of the cultural factors that affect learning among older adults in Malaysia is exemplary in its directness. She concludes that doing this research has told her equally much about the actual research topic as about the Malaysian’s own perspectives on older adulthood.

Elizabeth J. Tisdell writes chapter four about “Spirituality and Emancipatory Adult Education in Women Adult Educators for Social Change.” This study focuses on how spirituality affects and informs the work of feminist and anti-racist women educators who strive towards the goal of social emancipation. The adult educators were committed to work and teach in ways that challenged established power relations. Spirituality is an elusive term that is understood here as wholeness and what gives coherence to life. The methodological discussion at the end of this chapter is good and Tisdell’s comments on issues such as insider versus outsider issues in collecting and analyzing data are necessary reminders about the dangers of misinterpretation in qualitative research.

In chapter five, Richard F. Wolff describes a project called “A Phenomenological Study of In-Church and Televised Worship.” The purpose of the research project described here was to understand the importance of worship from first – hand descriptions and to consider how the experience of in-church worship compares to that of televised worship. This study is some-what special because of its subject and the research methods and design used. Wolff uses a method called semiotic – phenomenological, involving a movement among description, re-duction, and interpretation but with Semiotic phenomenology is based on the analysis of con-scious experience and the essential meaning revealed by speech in the description of a phe-nomenon. One important aspect of the research process was the value that qualitative research puts on a researcher’s self-reflection. Another important lesson learned here was the balancing of sensitivity and self-assurance needed during the interviewing phase.

Vaughn E. Worthen and Brian McNeill present “A Phenomenological Investigation of “Good” Supervision Events” in chapter six. The study describes the learning and acquisition of counseling skills in counseling psychology and the effects of psychotherapy supervision. The question of what constitutes an experience of good or positive supervisory events from the perspective of learners is addressed here. Second, there is a focus on the discovery of cen-tral factors that are of importance in good supervision. Some common factors were found, but the writers emphasize that there is a richness to individual experience of good supervisory events that transcends any common factors. The most important attributes of good supervision is to be found in supervisors’ interpersonal qualities which go along with theory and practical application. There is an interesting comparison at the end of this chapter between doing a qualitative and quantitative study, and the authors conclude that phenomenological methods of analysis require several things, for example a commitment to rigor and openness to learn-ing, in order to succeed.

Chapters seven to eight are examples of research based on the grounded theory approach. Chapter seven is titled “Development of Professional School Counselor Identity” by Pamela E. Brott and Jane E. Myers. As the title suggests, this article reflects on professional identity formation of school counselors and the research is done using an interview method. There is a good description of procedures and coding and about theory building in a grounded theory style. One conclusion of this study with regard to method is that although there are good software programs available for the analysis of qualitative interviews, a handwritten analysis of the interview material will be more

detailed and complete than a computer program. The authors compared two well-known programs, Nudist and Qualpro, but found that an analysis done by hand served their purposes better.

In chapter eight, Susan R. Jones and Marylu K. McEwen present a project called “A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.” The approach taken here is on socially constructed identities of ten young women. A conceptual model of identity using multiple dimensions emerged from the data: sexual orientation, race, gender, religion, social class and culture, as revolving around a core of personal identity. This is a novel approach because most research on identity has used fewer dimensions, sometimes only one or two. Several strategies were used in order to allow for feedback from participants so that validity would be enhanced, for example by writing individual letters to the participants about the research findings. The response to the letters was “overwhelming” in emotional intensity, and there was much positive feeling from the participants toward the researchers. By using grounded theory and ensuring feedback, the researchers could substantiate their findings quite well.

The case study is a time-honored qualitative method, and chapters nine and ten contain two examples from the field. Chapter nine is titled “The Role of the School in the Assimilation of Immigrant Children: A Case Study of Arab Americans” and is written by Ernestine K. Enomoto and Mary Antony Bair. In the US, there is a long tradition in the field of education to explore the assimilation of immigrants to the American public educational system. This study is quite extensive and thorough in its details of the problems of assimilation. The writers call their study an exploratory probe into the tension between assimilation and accommodation of immigrant children. Several problems were encountered during the research process, for example initial unwillingness of teachers to allow research to be done in their classroom. Gaining an access to the Arab community was also a challenge.

Chapter ten is a remarkable study of a gifted Black child living in rural poverty in Alabama. Jermaine, an African American third-grader, is a child endowed with exceptional creativity and a great talent for learning. The authors of this study, Thomas P. Hébert and Teresa M. Beardsley, write a fascinating case study of this child and its social and cultural school environment. Black children, especially in the deep South of the US, face a higher rate of poverty than children of any other ethnic group in the United States and the poverty of their families is in many cases a barrier to their future learning and development despite great efforts by the educational and other authorities to counter this unfortunate state of affairs. The theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis and findings of this study are exemplary in their thoroughness. Among the important lessons learnt during the research project, good preparation, primarily first-hand experience of the actual circumstances of the community, is paramount for understanding. Being respectful of the impoverished culture and community is another factor. An unproblematic access to the field of research was gained by volunteering for useful activities in and around the school etc. This chapter is well written and the reader is inspired by the sympathetic approach of the researcher. This chapter is definitely one of the best in this volume.

Chapters eleven and twelve describe two ethnographic studies. In chapter eleven, Shelley J. Correll describes her research in an electronic “lesbian café”; a virtual café based on a bulletin board system. The study is called “The Ethnography of an Electronic Bar” and examines how a community can be created and sustained through interactions via PC computer interaction. Social and sexual bulletin boards are popular with the gay and lesbian community in particular because this allows for interaction based on sexually explicit conversation. Lesbian communities in particular often serve the function of enhancing one’s sense of self and for clarifying identity problems. Correll’s study provides a sociological analysis of the Lesbian Café as a community constructed in cyberspace. The research method used here underlines the technology in use since a considerable part of the data were gathered either through messages and discussion on the bulletin board service and through semistructured interviews through e-mail. At a later stage, Correll was able to triangulate her methods by conducting real-life interviews and observation of several participants in this interesting project. Among the findings of this project is that electronically created communities are important because they have a positive effect on the development of self-concepts, besides a therapeutic effect on identity and other problems. One of the lessons learned is that people should be careful about premature conclusions and the necessity to be flexible and adaptive during the research process.

“Hard and Heavy-Gender and Power in a Heavy Metal Music Subculture” is the title of chapter twelve, written by Leigh Krenske and Jim McKay. This is a study about how a social constructionist perspective can be used to analyze gendered structures of power in a heavy metal music youth subculture. The focus here is on the disadvantaged conditions that make it necessary for women continuously to establish their gender in cultures where masculine values are prevalent. Speaking of gender related structures and meanings, women must in a sense bargain with masculine values, and they do this from a weaker position than men. There is a feminist framework at the base of this research. The design of the project includes male participants, since the tension between the sexes is a necessary source in order to analyze the relational aspects between men and women. There is a good discussion in this article about gender, power and space, sexuality and other topics relevant in this line of research. Krenske writes that this project shows how the researcher’s biography and embodied self played an important role in the whole process, through initial design, data collection and subsequent data analysis. There is a good discussion here about the lived experience of gender related factors and the bargaining of values between the sexes.

Chapters thirteen and fourteen are devoted to narrative analysis, a research tradition that is growing more popular in our times. Leslie Rebecca Bloom writes about “Stories of One’s Own-Nonunitary Subjectivity in Narrative Representation” in chapter thirteen. This article is based on the notion that women must speak and write in a language of their own in order to counter the prevalent and dominant male discourse. One possible way women have to do this is to reject a humanistic understanding of subjectivity as unchangeable. Instead, women should take up an interpretation of subjectivity as something that is constantly produced and new, in other words, a nonunitary subjectivity. Bloom wants to show how a narrative interpretation of subjectivity as nonunitary may generate an alternative understanding of the self. This is no small task, and it is enlightening to read

about how narrative analysis can actually be used to do this and substantiate the writer's claim. The sections about "Narrating and In-terpreting the Feminist Icon" and "Owning One's Own Life" are particularly interesting and well written. At the end of the chapter, Bloom writes that she advises novice researchers to maintain humility and be ethically responsive to the research. Humility means here, among other things, that a researcher should not be so preoccupied with his or her project that the re-relationship with research participants may be jeopardized. People participating in a research project must live their own lives and a researcher should be grateful for their help.

"Cathy, the Wrong Side of the Track" is the title of chapter fourteen, by Juanita Johnson-Bailey. Although designed as a narrative study, it has much in common with a case study, and an interesting one at that. This narrative is about the life experiences of Cathy, a 39 year old Black woman who re-enters college in her thirties. Cathy has faced many rejections during her life but fights a system and an environment that is hostile to the poor. When it comes to life experiences, however, Cathy is rich and her talents and fighting spirit carry her forward in the face of adversity. The discussion at the end of the chapter shows that it is always necessary to adapt one's research strategies to the changing life situation of participants. A cultur-ally specific linguistic approach was important in this case in order to maintain clear commu-nications.

Critical research is different from other qualitative approaches because it emphasizes a desire to bring about social and personal change, instead of reflecting on and interpreting meaning. Research questions are commonly framed in terms of power and the subsequent analysis is also focused on this topic. There is a rejection of the status quo and a belief that research done in this spirit is an agent of social change. Historical, economic and political structures are usually involved in a critical project. Chapters fifteen and sixteen are examples of critical re-search. Chapter fifteen is titled "Tootle-a Parable of Schooling and Destiny" and is written by Nicholas C. Burbules. "Tootle" is a children's book written and published in 1945 in the US. The book has been very popular and Burble asks several questions about this text. First, what is the story about? Why was it written and why has it been so widely read? Tootle is a young locomotive growing up in the town of Lower Trainswitch. As other young locomotives, Tootle goes to school with other locomotives of his generation and there is taught many rules, the most important of which is that he must always stay on the track. He must also learn to heed and obey different signals. Tootle is tempted to break the rules and leave the track, which is quite good fun. One day, however, when he leaves the track he meets many red flags. The only green flag is seen on the track, and Tootle hurries back and stays on the track after that. The similarity with the socialization process of young people and children is obvi-ous here, and Burble's critical analysis is both interesting and well written. He argues that a writer must show the advantages of the chosen research approach when using a parable, not by arguing for its theoretical foundations, but by "showing through the results that it was beneficial" (p. 349).

Jennifer A. Sandlin writes chapter sixteen about "The Politics of Consumer Education Mate-rials Used in Adult Literacy Classrooms." Sandlin examined sixteen lessons about consumer issues in adult literacy workbooks taught in an adult literacy classroom. The basic research assumption was

that textbooks addressing issues such as home budgeting, pricing and other consumer-related issues often taught in adult literacy programs privilege certain viewpoints and knowledge over others. The heart of the matter is that consumer education may reflect a dominant discourse of economic, political and social systems instead of focusing on matters that are closer to the actual needs of consumers. Critical research sees textbooks from this perspective as political objects that are connected to issues of social inequality. In other words, there is a hidden curriculum at the back of the textbooks. Sandlin found that the text-books about consumer education are designed to produce and maintain class inequality by promoting ideologies that ignore larger social, political and economic contexts and accept the present social system without question. This is a good critical analysis and much can be learnt from the methodological discussion; the writer points out the necessity of challenging the status quo and learning about the system that maintains social inequality. Sandlin underlines the point that critical research should not only criticize and strive to bring about change, it must also pay attention to positive social changes that could be brought about as the result of research.

Chapters seventeen and eighteen are devoted to postmodern research. Postmodernism includes a number of theoretical positions and interrelated concepts, for example deconstructionism and poststructuralism. At the core of postmodernism is the belief that the rationality, scientific method and certainties of the world are no longer valid. The explanations people have believed in about the nature of the world and life are seen as myths and legends, grand narratives etc. These should be replaced by microhistories, which are local, provisory and limited in nature. Everything is contested in a postmodern world and the relativity of truth is absolute. Wanda S. Pillow writes chapter seventeen about “Exposed Methodology – the Body as a Deconstructive Practice.” Pillows considers how paying attention to the human body, literally and figuratively, can inform and disrupt methodological practices. The research took place in a group of young pregnant women whose bodies were constantly changing. The focus of attention is on “...the messiness of bodies that exceed the boundaries of what we think we know about young women who are pregnant”(p. 378). Pillows writes a fascinating account of sex, pleasure, power, the physical transgression of boundaries and bodies and exposures. A deconstructive reading of the bodies leads not to a new formulation but points to possibilities and strategies for understanding. The remarks and findings of this research shatter many beliefs about teenage sexuality, a topic often avoided in “good” bourgeoisie social circles. Pillows remarks that “...theory is not a container to pour yourself or your data into, it is rather a lens that you use because it works and because you cannot write or work without it” (p. 396). This chapter is a must for researchers interested in postmodern feminist approach to research and achieves a great effect through uninhibited and clear writing.

Elizabeth A. St. Pierre writes chapter eighteen about “Methodology in the Fold and the Irruption of Transgressive Data.” As could be expected, St. Pierre writes a highly interesting article about qualitative methodology as a key to discovering and obtaining knowledge from a post-modern stance, with the aims of “...revitalizing academic and public discourses to guide our teaching and learning” (p. 399). It is impossible to do justice to this article in a few sentences, but I want to point out St. Pierre’s comments on two aspects of qualitative data that are important. Data can be seen as a signifier in qualitative research. The first problem is that data of any kind must be recorded in words and sentences in order for interpretation to be possible. Data of any kind must be put into the

code of language, into words, and the words are then put into categories, for example in qualitative textual analysis. St. Pierre asks: "...how can language, which regularly falls apart, secure meaning and truth? How can language provide the evidentiary warrant for the production of knowledge in a postmodern world?" The second problem is "...the ruthlessly linear nature of the narrative of knowledge production in re-search methodology, which goes something like this: first we produce data, then we code, categorize, analyze, and interpret those data; finally, from that analysis and interpretation, we develop theories of knowledge. What happens, however, when this linear process is inter-rupted because the researcher enters this narrative in the middle?"(p. 404) The important mes-sage learnt here is that it is not possible to ignore the link between epistemology and method-ology, concepts that have a meaning in poststructural research that is very different from the meaning attributed to them in positivist, interpretivist or critical projects. This chapter makes exciting reading, but is written on a level that assumes a good grounding in the philosophy of qualitative research in general and a good grasp of postmodern thought and literature.

Sharan B. Merriam and associates, who have written this book, have done a good and thor-ough job of introducing main facets of qualitative research in practice. The book is an im-mense resource for novice students of qualitative research methods, with a lot of practical ad-vice about what to do and what to avoid when doing research. The book is easy to follow and the chapters are presented in a logical order that address many and different topics. The ar-ticles are generally well written and more often than not enjoyable and fun to read. Several of them handle topics that are at the very forefront of qualitative methods development. As an introduction to the field, this book can therefore be highly recommended. I only miss one thing here. It would have been nice to have some contributions from other parts of the world than the United States of America. Of the fifteen main contributors, only one lives and works outside the US. This makes the book primarily a reader about qualitative methodology based on work done on the US front.