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A Winning Combination for Business Researchers: A Review of Qualitative Methods in Business Research

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Abstract

Qualitative Methods in Business Research by Paivi Eriksson and Anne Kovalainen is a comprehensive, current, and compelling text discussing both qualitative research in general and nine specific approaches in particular. These include: case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, focus group research, action research, narrative research, discursive research, critical research and feminist research. The reviewer identifies the considerable strengths of this book, which include its attention to the writing process that differentiates qualitative from quantitative research, and recommends the book as a solid resource for both students and practitioners.

Keywords

Qualitative Methods, Qualitative Research, Qualitative Approaches, Business Research, and Management Research

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A Winning Combination for Business Researchers: A Review of *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*

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Qualitative Methods in Business Research by Paivi Eriksson and Anne Kovalainen is a comprehensive, current, and compelling text discussing both qualitative research in general and nine specific approaches in particular. These include: case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, focus group research, action research, narrative research, discursive research, critical research and feminist research. The reviewer identifies the considerable strengths of this book, which include its attention to the writing process that differentiates qualitative from quantitative research, and recommends the book as a solid resource for both students and practitioners. **Key Words:** *Qualitative Methods, Qualitative Research, Qualitative Approaches, Business Research, and Management Research*

As a long-time management professor with undergraduate work in sociology, I have long been interested in qualitative research methods but have had little formal training in the field. Having decided it was about time to delve further into the qualitative methods that might be appropriate for management research, I was stymied by the fact that most readily available textbooks in the field focus on qualitative research as it pertains to the medical and social services fields. Creswell's (2007) 2nd edition of *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, for example, gave me the philosophical background and interpretive frameworks I needed, as well as considerable detail on five qualitative approaches including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research. However, the lengthy examples focused on non-business topics such as campus responses to a gunman, coping of women surviving childhood sexual abuse, and cognitive representations of AIDS. While the principles and practices of the various approaches are obviously applicable to a wide range of topics, I found myself yearning for more concrete business and management examples, especially since in my role as Editor of the *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, I am handling a fair number of qualitatively-oriented articles and I wanted more specific tools to evaluate these manuscripts.

While seeking sources that would give me these specific tools and examples, I found books such as Cavana, Delahaye, and Sekaran's (2001) *Applied Business Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, Keegan's (2008) *Redefining Qualitative Research within a Business Context*, Myers' (2009) *Redefining Qualitative Research within a Business Context*, and Marchan-Piekkari and Welch's (2005) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for International Business*. I hit the jackpot, however, when I laid my hands on Paivi Eriksson and Anne Kovalainen's (2008) *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*. This is a book that can serve as a ready reference for me, as well as one that I can recommend to my doctoral dissertation students interested in pursuing qualitative research.

Qualitative Methods in Business Research is written by experienced research methods professors with an eye toward practical and useful information. While covering a plethora of qualitative methods appropriate for business students and researchers, it also provides useful advice on the overall research and writing process, including information on ethics and evaluation.

The book is organized into three parts and 20 chapters, and while it can be used as a textbook (witness the exercises and further reading at the end of chapters), the textbook features are understated and do not dissuade the non-student from using this book as a reference. Part One is entitled, “The Business of Qualitative Research,” and the authors quickly acknowledge their goal in providing an alternative to business research books that combine both quantitative and qualitative techniques where the latter is limited to a few common approaches such as case study and grounded theory. The authors intend to give budding researchers far more approaches from which to choose. Their book also differs from the norm in that the authors “consider qualitative business research as an adequate method of knowledge production, also without any link to quantitative research” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 5).

The eight chapters in Part I lay the groundwork for the more specific methods discussion in Part II. This groundwork includes chapters on research design and process, focus and framing of the research questions, access to and relationships with the research participants, ethics, qualitative research materials and how to get those materials, and electronic research. The full chapter on doing electronic research highlights the emerging importance of researching literature electronically as well as producing materials via electronic methods. Examples of this would be electronic focus groups and e-mail interviews.

Part II introduces nine separate qualitative research approaches and how each approach relates to research questions and design, data collection and analysis, drawing conclusions and writing up results. The nine approaches are divided into two groups by the authors as follows.

Case studies, focus group research, and grounded theory research have a relatively long history within business research.... Ethnography, narrative, and discursive research, as well as critical, feminist, and action research, have not been so extensively used in business research as yet, but the interest in them is clearly growing. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 7-8)

Each chapter in Part II provides specific “how-to” guidelines and ends with a section on writing and evaluating that particular type of research. Examples of published articles using the methodology are given and additional readings are suggested; thus for someone wanting basic information on one or more specific approaches such as case study or focus group research, these chapters can easily be used as stand-alone information.

For students or others just starting out in writing qualitative research papers or reports, the chapters in Part III are very useful. Part III deals with the writing and evaluation processes with a full chapter devoted to each. This is particularly important to those of us used to scientific writing where formality is maximized and the personal

element is purposefully rejected. Qualitative writing, on the other hand, is personal and often interpretive by design. Passive voice makes way for first person narrative and the writer is expected to position him or herself as an insider in the discourse. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) recommend the researcher “think like a novelist” (p. 280).

It can be argued that, in order to perform a credible qualitative study, you as a researcher need to construct the setting in your writing and help the readers to enter this setting where the data once lived. This is why you should not remain an outsider of this story, but to be present in your text as one of the characters. (p. 280)

For those used to doing quantitative research, this difference in style is significant, and the full chapter coverage on this topic is worthwhile indeed. It also provides a key example of why I like this book so much. The authors are fully aware of the changes and accommodations that many business researchers who are steeped in scientific methods have to make in order to be effective qualitative writers. There is a journey to be made between the specific, sometimes confining, rigor of quantitative methods and the more abstract, interpretive rigor of qualitative methods. The authors do not try to say that one is better than the other, but they do allay the fears of anyone who feels that qualitative research may be deemed less worthy than quantitative techniques in producing both good theory and implications for practice.

In summing up the strengths and weaknesses of the Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) book, I must admittedly take a one-sided approach. The writing style, copious references, and concrete business examples, in addition to the considerable attention given to writing guidelines, are the main strengths in this reader’s opinion. *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* is written in a way that graduate students and practitioners alike can readily understand. It is free of the jargon and esoteric vocabulary sometimes associated with such texts. Clearly the authors demonstrate an ability to communicate effectively with their readers in a clear, crisp, and informative style. The 300 pages of text are all meaningful and supplemented by an extensive glossary just to be sure that no reader gets bogged down in unfamiliar terms. Lest the reader of this review think that this transparent and reader-friendly style signifies a less-than-academic approach, I want to reiterate that many academic references are used throughout the text. This is especially true in the chapters covering individual methodologies where the authors refer us back to the scholars who originated the theoretical underpinnings of each approach as well as to others who have published research using that approach. The latter point ties into the third key strength, i.e., concrete business examples. If you are interested in knowing how action research could be used in your field of interest, for example, the chapter on action research will surely provide that information. In addition, it will give you the history of action research, the key people in the field, and detailed information regarding how to design your study, collect data, analyze data, and describe the results. As stated earlier, each methods chapter can be used as a standalone primer on that approach.

The lack of apparent weaknesses is why I admitted to a one-sided analysis. It is not in my nature to skip over critique, but I found this book such a solid contributor to the niche it identified, that I have no suggestions for improvement. As it stands, the book is

comprehensive, current, and compelling, a winning combination for any research student or practitioner interested in increasing his/her knowledge about qualitative methods as they apply to business research.

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Author's Note

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