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A Review of Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work

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A Review of Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work

Abstract

Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work by Robert E. Stake reviews the processes, procedures, concepts, and assumptions of qualitative research in a way that encourages the reader to consider multiple elements of the design, implementation, and reporting of a study. This book is appropriate for a wide range of qualitative and mixed-methods researchers, including those who are just beginning and those who have moved beyond the basics and are working on their own studies. Stake's clear and conversational style makes this book easy to understand and apply to one's own work, but the text will challenge readers to take their reasoning about and understanding of qualitative research beyond an introductory level.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Design, Dissertation Proposal, Interpretation

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A Review of *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*

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Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work by Robert E. Stake reviews the processes, procedures, concepts, and assumptions of qualitative research in a way that encourages the reader to consider multiple elements of the design, implementation, and reporting of a study. This book is appropriate for a wide range of qualitative and mixed-methods researchers, including those who are just beginning and those who have moved beyond the basics and are working on their own studies. Stake's clear and conversational style makes this book easy to understand and apply to one's own work, but the text will challenge readers to take their reasoning about and understanding of qualitative research beyond an introductory level. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Design, Dissertation Proposal, Interpretation*

As researchers, we are often interested in why and how things “work.” This is the focus of Robert E. Stake, in his book *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work* (2010). As I began my review of this book, I started as most reviewers might: I read some online reviews, flipped through the table of contents, glanced at some of the diagrams, scanned the introduction, read about the author. As I looked over the summary of the book on its back cover, I read this statement: “After reading this book, doctoral students and novice qualitative researchers will be able to plan a study from beginning to end.” As a doctoral candidate working on her dissertation proposal, I found myself hoping that this was true. After all, the subtitle of this book is *Studying How Things Work*; so, how does this book “work” for planning a qualitative study?

As I made my way through this book, I found my focus shifting back and forth between that of a reviewer, reading the book for themes, tone, and overall usage, and that of a doctoral candidate thinking about her dissertation proposal. In brief, the goal of this book is to provide a framework for beginning and intermediate qualitative researchers to plan out a study. Stake (2010) walks the reader, his student for the time, through the process of qualitative research, discussing what it is, how to state the research problem, gather data, review the literature, analyze and synthesize the data that has been collected, and write up the results. Essentially, he helps the reader to begin to study “how things work” through qualitative research methodology. In order to study how this book “works,” I focused on reading and reviewing this book as a qualitative researcher might (Chenail, 2010), remembering that “[q]ualitative research encourages us as investigators to be mindful of who we are and how our perspectives can influence how we interact with others and make sense of the world around us” (p. 1635). Additionally, I considered Stake's discussion of interpretation as I organized my thoughts about this book. Stake writes,

The best interpretations will be logical extensions of the simple description but will also include contemplative, speculative, even aesthetic

extension. . . . They are contributions of the researcher, written so as to make it clear they are personal interpretations. All people make interpretations. All research requires interpretations. Qualitative research relies heavily on interpretive perceptions throughout the planning, data gathering, analysis, and write-up of the study. (p. 55)

I have tried to integrate these elements into my review of this book, both in approaching it as a qualitative researcher and in trying to apply Stake's thoughts on interpretation to my own perceptions of this book.

Stake (2010) covers issues that are both commonly covered in qualitative research texts (i.e., Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), as well as topics that are less-frequently covered, such as the use of storytelling in the reporting of data. His chapters span larger issues such as the Person as an Instrument (Chapter 2), Experiential Understanding (Chapter 3), Review of Literature (Chapter 6), Writing the Final Report (Chapter 11), and Advocacy and Ethics (Chapter 12). Chapters are then broken down into smaller, more-focused segments. In each chapter, Stake presents examples of the concepts and ideas he describes in a variety of ways, such as a brief vignette to convey the idea of personal perspective, a short case study, or a list of tips for storing data (i.e., p. 152). A strength of Stake's writing is that he uses examples from a range of topics, projects, and people to describe the points he discusses. He uses examples from graduate students who have been successful, from colleagues he has worked with, and from his own research. This breadth of examples gives the reader multiple perspectives of how qualitative practices can be used and are applicable to all types of projects, formal or informal, large or small, individual or collaborative.

Throughout his book, Stake (2010) makes the effort to engage the reader by using a conversational tone and a style that makes the content clear and concise, without sounding overly simplistic. This style and tone works very well for this text; Stake was able to discuss and describe qualitative research, its processes, and its procedures in a way that is understandable and comfortable to the reader. In addition, the effort by Stake early in the book to introduce himself to the reader gives a sense of personalization and collegiality; it seems as though the book is written for you, as a person but, at the same time, for everyone who will pick this book up. The duality of the audience being both one person and many people is a thought that Stake, himself, articulates from time to time. It is also written in a manner that reflects the times: Stake mentions again and again the usage of modern technology as it relates to qualitative inquiry and practice, including Wikipedia, text messaging, iPods, and the Internet as tools to help the researcher throughout the project. Stake even uses a word cloud before his introduction to visually describe the contents of his book (see below, for a word cloud created from this review). As Stake describes dimension after dimension of "how things work," he encourages the reader to take an active part in thinking and learning about qualitative research and its many intricacies. Stake asks the reader to ponder the usage of one technique over the other, which techniques may overlap and which may conflict, and to consider one's own experiences in qualitative research. He also provides the reader with various "tasks" and critical thinking "assignments" that one can use as practice, to reiterate many of the ideas conveyed in this book.



Word cloud, created using www.wordle.net

One thing I appreciated about the way this book was written and, I believe, is true about Stake in general, is the emphasis he places on duality. Throughout the chapters, Stake (2010) frequently discusses the interplay between dualities: qualitative and quantitative research; objectivity and subjectivity; analysis and synthesis; micro and macro research; informal and formal evaluation. In highlighting these, Stake encourages the reader to think critically about the possibilities that stem from them: how they are used, how they can be used, and how to achieve some kind of balance between the two, often arguing that good research encompasses both parts of the duality. This is well-exemplified in his background as an educational researcher. While Stake began his career using primarily quantitative data and methods, he eventually moved to primarily qualitative methods. This shift, however, as with other examples throughout the book, exists as a duality: Stake makes it clear to the reader that both qualitative and quantitative aspects exist in any study, and that the lines between the two are not always as clear as they may seem, overlapping and complementing each other in both obvious and subtle ways. As he points out, while the two methodologies vary in goals, there are characteristics common to both, and both seek to understand “how things work.” Stake’s eloquent description of the relationship of qualitative and quantitative methods conveys a sense of true respect—and need—for the understanding and appreciation of each.

While my impression of this book is that is primarily written to support graduate classes and students working on a dissertation or thesis, I do think that a range of scholars and academics would find this book very useful (to be sure, Stake (2010) does mention applications to both large and small research projects, dissertations, theses, and formal and informal reports throughout his discussion). Beginning graduate students, whether on their own or with a class, would be wise to use this book as a starting point in thinking about the basics of qualitative research, as well as some of the complexities that come with it. This is also a book they may want to keep around, for future reference, once they have a solid grasp of those basics. More advanced students and researchers would benefit from Stake’s clear descriptions of some of the finer nuances of qualitative research and inquiry, as well as his focus on duality. As Stake writes, “[b]uscar ayuda buscar: Seeking makes better seeking” (p. 73). Asking oneself, “what dualities are present in *my* work,

and how should I handle them?” would certainly lead to, at the very least, some interesting insight. Similarly, while the advanced reader will find many of the same concepts and assumptions discussed in this book that are also discussed in other books about qualitative research, the way in which Stake describes these is unique enough to help the reader develop her existing thoughts to an even clearer understanding. And finally, for the individual working on a thesis, dissertation, or work report, Stake offers ideas and examples of ways to organize and store data, research questions for different scopes of inquiry, ways to analyze and synthesize data, and how to lay out the final report in a systematic, conscious way. Through my student lens, I was able to identify with many of the topics and issues that Stake discussed as things central to my progress at this point in my work; my copy of this book is filled with tabs, notes, and highlights that span many chapters. There are also, however, sections of this book that I have marked with only indicators, to remind myself to return to these a bit later in the process. I anticipate this being a book I can use again and again, each time gaining a clearer understanding of the complex process of studying how things work.

Overall, the way in which Stake’s book “works” is through his ability to be fully invested in the reader using only paper and ink; to use clear, concise description, coupled with the challenge to think about issues deeply and complexly; to support readers as well as challenge them; to make strategies adaptable to small or large studies; to give an overview of the concepts, assumptions, processes and procedures of qualitative design and encourage readers to struggle with the intricacies and specificities of their own research. Stake encourages readers to take on an active role in the study of qualitative research, consider its relationships and uses, and question what will work in their own inquiry.

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