The Sense and Sensibility of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

David Silverman's new edition of Qualitative Research addresses how to engage in qualitative research with increased sensibility. The book is divided into seven sections with 23 chapters written by premier researchers. The chapters are written for students rather than the writers' peers, and while every chapter makes extensive use of the authors' fieldwork and data, John Heritage's chapter on conversational analysis (CA) stands out because he demonstrates to the reader how he made sense of a recurring piece of talk he calls an "oh-prefaced response." The papers are clearly written with helpful summaries and suggested further readings and online resources. Less helpful are the questions posed at the end of each chapter.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Practices, Ethics, Theory, and Methods

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The Sense and Sensibility of Qualitative Research

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David Silverman's new edition of Qualitative Research addresses how to engage in qualitative research with increased sensibility. The book is divided into seven sections with 23 chapters written by premier researchers. The chapters are written for students rather than the writers' peers, and while every chapter makes extensive use of the authors' fieldwork and data, John Heritage's chapter on conversational analysis (CA) stands out because he demonstrates to the reader how he made sense of a recurring piece of talk he calls an "oh-prefaced response." The papers are clearly written with helpful summaries and suggested further readings and online resources. Less helpful are the questions posed at the end of each chapter. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Practices, Ethics, Theory, and Methods.

David Silverman's (2011) third edition of *Qualitative Research* is not a "how to." It is not a methodological cookbook. It is not a collection of solutions or answers to questions that might be posed by neophyte or more seasoned students of qualitative research. The authors of these 23 chapters are not talking about how many interviews are needed for an understanding of end of life experiences, for example, or how to reduce the number of codes being used in a grounded theory study of pathologists and their discovery (construction) of medical errors, or how to move between findings and data when one is writing up conversational analytical research. What *Qualitative Research* provides is some real insight into qualitative practices—the "whys" and the "what," enabling one to become a more sensitive and thoughtful research practitioner.

Silverman's (2011) *Qualitative Research* book offers the reader seven distinct themes: observation (with a focus on ethnography); texts; interviews and focus groups; talk; visual data; qualitative data analysis; and the wider community (with chapters on ethics and policy implications). Each chapter has been written by first class researchers—Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, Christian Heath, John Heritage, Kathy Charmaz and Antony Bryant, Tim Rapley, Mick Bloor, Ansi Perakyla, to name just a few—for and to an audience of novices. For students to have the opportunity to listen to rather than engage in the far more common practice of "eavesdropping" on such scholars as they write to and for their peers is priceless.

Perhaps the one word that best encapsulates this collection of papers is "sensibility." This is the term that Eberle and Maeder (2011) use in their chapter, "Organizational Ethnography". They write that sensibilities "provide information and background, questions and a range of answers and the tricks of the trade available for ethnographic consideration" (p. 55). What Silverman and the contributors to this third edition have done is to provide readers—the graduate students, researchers, teachers and perhaps those involved in funding qualitative research—with ideas that develop and enrich our sensibilities about the nature and practice of qualitative research.

In his introduction, Silverman (2011) states that *Qualitative Research* was grounded on six assumptions that include "(t)he centrality of the relationship between analytic perspectives and methodological issues and the consequent requirement to go beyond a purely "cookbook" version of research methods" (p. 4). So, Jody Miller and Barry Glassner (2011) in their chapter on interviewing entitled "The 'Inside' and the 'Outside:' Finding Realities in the Interview," explore the relationship between the story and the teller. If you are looking for help in teaching or in thinking about interviewing as a practical matter or in thinking about how to develop a semi-structured set of questions, you may not find this text helpful. But if you are thinking about what in fact we do when we do qualitative research then this book is excellent.

As Silverman (2011) concludes his brief yet adequate introduction, he offers the reader a suggested itinerary—the "not to miss" places to visit first, his Tower of London, his Mona Lisa. These first chapters to read include Gobo on ethnography, Holstein and Gubrium on the interview, Markham on using the internet, Rapley on data analysis, Marvasti on writing up the research, and Ryen on ethics. These chapters, Silverman suggests, are particularly student-friendly, and indeed they are, and yet they are also richly rewarding for more seasoned readers.

Annette Markham's (2011) discussion of the use of the internet as resource, the use of chat-rooms, for instance, or as topic, the "chrono-malleability" (p. 118) of asynchronous interaction, turns to ethical issues surrounding the researcher's use of chat-room posts, and the like, on the internet. How might we need to consider expectations of privacy and what does it mean to simply make use of the material people have posted for one set of purposes (perhaps people dealing with a recurrence of cancer or their sexual identities) for our research purposes? How are we to deal with issues of informed consent when we use the internet?

Holstein and Gubrium (2011) discuss the interview as meaning-making "performance" and explore the "inherent interpretive activity" of the interview. They convincingly demonstrate that interviews are never "search and discovery" activities (p. 153) designed to uncover the stories residing within the "relatively static, inert vessel" of the respondent (p. 155). Rather meaning "…is assembled in the interview encounter. Participants in an interview are not so much elicitors and repositories of experiential knowledge, as they are constructors of experiential information" (p. 151).

One contributor not singled out by Silverman, Michael Emmison (2011), has written a thought-provoking chapter, "Conceptualizing Visual Data," which forces the reader to consider how much of mainstream sociology has in fact extensively contributed to visual research and whether the study of photographic and other two-dimensional images has really broadened and deepened our understanding of "the seen and the observable" (p. 246). Emmison argues for example, that Stimson's (1986) exploration of the grand room in which the British General Medical Council's disciplinary hearings took place "illustrates perfectly how visual inquiry which is not dependent upon the photograph can be conducted" (p. 239).

Tim Rapley's (2011) chapter, "Some Pragmatics of Qualitative Data Analysis," urges the reader to begin with paper and pen rather than any software designed to help with coding (p. 280) in part because the use of those simple tools allows you to mark up and scrawl on and cross out and underline in ways that software still cannot. Whether or not everyone would agree with Rapley's advice, his key ideas are that coding is a way to

meaningfully simplify and reduce data and that writing is "essential at all stages of the analytic trajectory" (Rapley, p. 287) and not be something to be undertaken only at the end of the analysis.[1]

If most of the contributors to *Qualitative Research* make free use of their own work and offer snippets of their data to illustrate their points, and if these scholars frequently cross-reference other chapters in this volume, John Heritage (2011) offers something a little different. Heritage's contribution is a delightful chapter on conversational analysis (CA) wherein he reveals a glimpse of what CA can do with a topic. While providing a few key theoretical underpinnings of CA by way of significant context (turn taking and sequence), Heritage then shows the reader how he made good sense of the CA topic "oh prefacing of responses to questions," which Heritage notes is "a practice" that he himself has "well-researched" (p. 213). But more than that, what Heritage does is to highlight how methodological techniques used by grounded theory (coding, constant comparison, and deviant cases, for example) can be used by conversational analysts when they examine strips of talk. That kind of point—and similar insights found throughout Silverman's book—is what makes this volume so useful and important.

Silverman and the contributors to this volume work from the premise that published qualitative work is typically far more robust, and rightfully and appropriately self confident than is perhaps always evident. Wacquant's (2002) razor-sharp and devastating critique of much that is accepted as good qualitative research, and which is cited by Kathy Charmaz and Anthony Bryant (2011, pp. 293-294), is only minimally if implicitly touched by any of the other authors. Thus, for example, Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey (2011) caution that "It is usually unhelpful to approach the analysis of documentary materials from an initially critical or evaluative stance. It is more helpful to adopt a more interpretive standpoint.... *What kind of reality is this document creating and how does it do it"* (emphasis in the original) (p. 81). "Unhelpful" might seem a rather tepid caution given the kinds of "findings" that result if we take Wacquant's paper at all seriously.

With perhaps one exception—but more about that towards the end—none of the authors really delve into the relationship between theory, theorizing, and the collection of data. Wacquant's (2002) rejection of much that was and often still is presented as robust qualitative work seems to be based rather more on data collection that has been inadequately theorized, analysis that ignores the wider context of available theory and situated theorizing by the ethnographer of the collected data that is unsupported by the data themselves. None of this is adequately addressed by dismissing Wacquant's epistemological fairy-tale of "grounded theory" or "diagnostic ethnography" (p. 1481) as no longer having any currency since the advent of Kathy Charmaz and her colleagues' constructivist approaches to grounded theory (2011, p. 293). Wacquant's scalpel, however, reaches much further and cuts far deeper. He argues:

> This is a problem that affects...ethnographic inquiry in the United States generally, owing to the sharp methodological cleavages, the hegemonic hold of instrumental positivism, and the bifurcation of research and "theorizing" that characterize American Sociology. (p. 1523, footnote 63)

Even if Silverman's *Qualitative Research* does not rebut Wacquant's criticisms square on, the sensibilities it encourages are nevertheless steps in the right direction.

Does Silverman (2011) accomplish what he says he set out to do with this volume? Does this book fill gaps that need to be filled? Silverman's "hope" is that the text "will be used by students who are not yet familiar with the approaches involved, their theoretical underpinnings and their research practice" (p. 5), but it is not entirely clear that such naïve and neophyte readers will grasp the significance of much of what the contributors offer. Certainly, my own experience with undergraduate students is that many if not most of them navigate the social sciences with the profoundly positivist approaches to social reality with which they began their studies still largely unquestioned and, at the end, still quite intact despite their teachers' labors. This text, I would argue, is far better suited to students undertaking masters programs, if not doctoral research, who have already been introduced to qualitative research methods and who are being asked to reflect on their own first steps into data collection in, or analysis or write-ups of, chat-rooms on the internet, narrative accounts, strips of conversation, cell phone videos or the myriad of everyday settings that form the corpus of qualitative study.

The language and the style used throughout this text are uniformly clear and transparent. Each chapter is well-written and indeed, each chapter includes a brief summary, an even briefer few sentences that focus on "future prospects," a list of recommended further reading, a section listing relevant internet links and some questions presumably to help focus the reader's attention on the most salient points presented in each chapter. While the recommended readings are useful, these questions are, sadly, perhaps the weakest feature of the text. They often resemble what one of my mentors used to refer to as "the seven key exports of Argentina, question." For example, at the end of Giampietro Gobo's (2011) rich, insightful and really useful account of ethnographic fieldwork, its history and development within and beyond the first and second Chicago Schools, we are asked to consider what the five (not four? not six?) main characteristics of participant observation are (p. 32), while Marie Buscatto (2011) asks, "What are ethnography's three main contributions to the study of gender in work settings or situations?" (p. 49). At the end of Anne Ryen's (2011) chapter on Ethics we are asked: "What research ethical guidelines are you compelled to follow in your own research? Look them up" (p. 433). These are the kinds of questions that one might ask of a high school student, but surely not an undergraduate, still less a graduate student.

Remaining with Ryen's (2011) chapter on ethics, I have to express a little tug of disappointment. The chapter focuses on the protection of the participants and the protection of the locale and topic for other researchers, and it certainly does so in ways in keeping with a constructivist or post modernist approach to ethics. Ryen in one nice section highlights with some irony how research workers may put themselves in the position to act as therapist or counselor for respondents (surely a role not so very different from the one in which faculty often find themselves), perhaps because they have adopted a "quasi-therapeutic interview" (p. 429) that demolishes any sense of boundaries between different roles such as "friend" and "researcher." Ryen then wisely reminds the reader that they are trained as ethnographers and not as therapists (p. 429). But boundaries are more complex than Ryen suggests.

In presenting her own experiences with Mahid, a "key- informant" [1] Ryen (2011) touches on some "light hearted" flirting that she says is evident in the talk between them (pp. 427-428). What Ryen does not do is raise any question about sexual contact between the researcher and respondent, whether broached by the respondent or by the researcher, an issue that is not unknown to occur in the field (Neil McKeganey, personal communication).

I mentioned above, in relation to issues raised by Wacquant (2002) that there was one notable exception, one contributor to this volume who raised important epistemological and political questions that tied research into issues of policy and practice. This exception is Michael Bloor (2011), who thoughtfully considers questions about the relationship among pre-defined social problems, the researcher's role (if any) assisting participants' resistance to or compliance with authority and any role in influencing practitioners' practices.

> The claim that social research can and should be value neutral is under attack from two sides. On one side, battle has been joined by those who argue that research should be explicitly politically participatory, embracing particular aims, such as combating racism or patriarchy. On the other side, battle has been joined by those who argue that *no* practice or policy prescriptions can be offered by researchers under any circumstances, since all knowledge is socially constructed and there are no grounds for the researcher to claim superior knowledge. (Bloor, p. 411)

Despite the complexity of this picture, Bloor (2011) concludes by suggesting that there does seem to be some theoretical "space" for qualitative researchers to legitimately "influence practitioner practice" (p. 412). I am not sure that Bloor provides a convincing argument for that position in his essay, and I am not sure I am comfortable agreeing that there are always, or even occasionally, good grounds for taking sides but Bloor says that he had no qualms about advocating for social outreach workers in Glasgow to work with male prostitutes to help ensure their health and safety. He also discusses a situation where he requested that clients in psychiatric therapeutic communities be formally charged with the responsibility of ensuring that fellow residents maintain attendance when they might otherwise seek to discharge themselves after feeling challenged or threatened by therapy – a responsibility which the community of patients tended, in any event to adopt informally.

As Bloor writes, "…patients who did silently discharge themselves by failing to return to the day hospital could expect a delegation of fellow-patients visiting them at their homes, urging them to return" (p. 408). "Taking sides," for a qualitative researcher, seems to me to be considerably more fraught than Bloor suggests, and often the answers in which one might wrap oneself ought surely to involve considerably more doubt and hesitation than Bloor's examples might suggest be required.

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[1] Isn't the term "informant" weighed down with heavy positivist baggage in ways that "member", "actor", "respondent", "collaborator" are not? "Informant" is suggestive of the notion that the informant informs and the ethnographer or qualitative researcher passively listens and observes– a view that Ryen clearly does not hold and which this book, throughout, works hard to question but which some readers of this edition might still harbor.

In sum, then, despite one or two small quibbles, Silverman's (2011) *Qualitative Research* is thoughtfully written and will be a useful and thought-provoking addition to the reading of any graduate student who has begun to engage in qualitative research. To see the book's table of contents, read the first chapter, see other reviews, and learn more about the book, you can visit the publisher's website for the book at: http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book234372?siteId=sage-uk&prodTypes=Textbooks&q=Silverman+Qualitative+Research+3rd#tabview=title.

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