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## Applied Interpretation: A Review of Interpretive Description by Sally Thorne

### **Abstract**

In this book review I focus on the connections between the concepts, applied and interpretive, in conjunction with Sally's Thorne's (2008) emphasis on using interpretive qualitative research to answer the questions that practitioners encounter in their work.

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Research, Applied, Interpretive, Description

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## **Applied Interpretation: A Review of *Interpretive Description* by Sally Thorne**

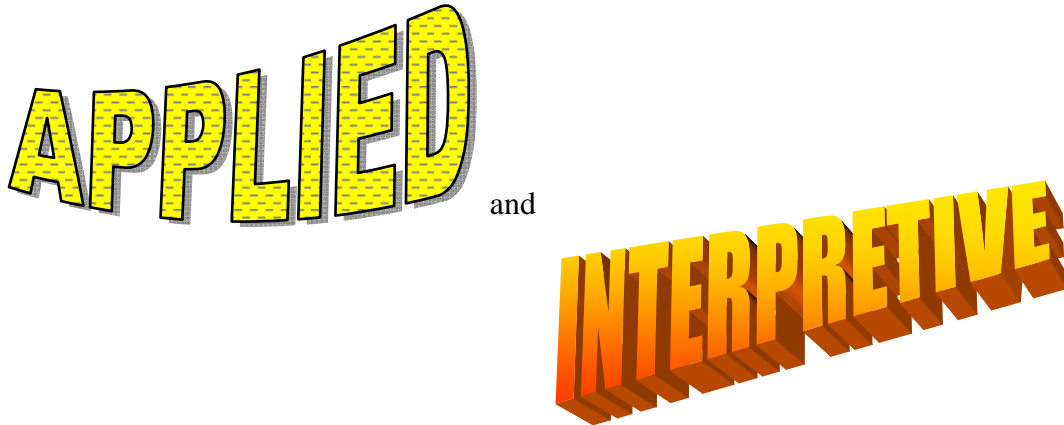
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*In this book review I focus on the connections between the concepts, applied and interpretive, in conjunction with Sally's Thorne's (2008) emphasis on using interpretive qualitative research to answer the questions that practitioners encounter in their work. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Applied, Interpretive, and Description*

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These are two words that will give you the quickest sense of this book, *Interpretive Description* by Sally Thorne (2008):



They may seem like routinely used words, words that might not easily go together. *Applied* may conjure images of hands-on work and skills that produce something in the end such as baking a loaf of bread, installing new plumbing, or washing dishes. *Interpretive* may bring to mind the different ways paintings or literature are discussed, or an argument among family members who do not see eye-to-eye on recounting an incident they all experienced. Applied may sound concrete, grounded, having to do with action and behaviour while interpretive may sound open, changeable, loose, individualistic, and having to do with thinking and talking. However, they are words that represent important research concepts that I think deserve attention and that can help you to decide if this book by Sally Thorne is for you or your students or your workmates. You will also notice that one of the words is in the title and one is not, but in her book they are tightly linked.

Thorne (2008) makes it clear to readers that her purposes, intentions, aspirations, desires, and agenda are to speak to those who are interested in qualitative research that is geared to the clinician. Many people speak about integrations across research and practice, but it is an area that requires action and not just talk. Thorne makes sure that readers understand that her book would “fail as a ‘cookbook’. . . [but] help the reader grapple intelligently with the ‘how to’ in conjunction with the ‘why’” (p. 36). That may be translated into making sure that a researcher can answer the “so what?” question about

his/her research projects. Thorne and I have a first name in common—we also hold in common the need for “qualitative descriptive approaches that. . . extend beyond mere description and into the domain of the ‘so what’ that drives all applied disciplines” (p. 33). So if you are a practitioner and want to check out qualitative inquiry for practitioners, then I would advise you to get this book and use it. The advice in the book is practical and yet open, staying within the interpretive spirit.

Applied and interpretive inquiry go hand in hand because “judgment artistry in professional practice can be better studied through an interpretive lens compared to an empirical lens” (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 342). Practitioners know much, see much, and are closest to the action. They also know that their practices are dynamic and unpredictable to some degree and they need inquiry that can accommodate the challenges of the ever-changing world of practice and the variety of people with whom they work; therefore, practice is the perfect candidate for interpretive description. Thorne (2008) says, “I see it as a way of naming and referencing the kind of well-founded logic that clinical researchers have been coming up with in many of what I would consider the most highly respected applications of qualitative research within the health domain” (p. 35). Her ideas and suggestions, while focusing on her discipline of expertise which is nursing, have merit for all practitioner disciplines—education, organizational development, accounting, information systems, and more. I found examples of interpretive description within these fields and more by conducting a quick Google search of interpretive research.

Interpretive research is something that has been written about in depth, especially in the big qualitative handbooks that are standard on most of our bookshelves. When I want a capsule version of a qualitative concept and suggested references, I usually head to Thomas Schwandt’s *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (2001). In order to get reacquainted with what is written with regard to interpretive research I looked at his definition of interpretation:

This is the act of clarifying, explicating, or explaining the meaning of some phenomenon. The claims of both the natural and the human or social sciences are interpretation in this sense. The terms *interpretivism*, interpretive (or interpretative) social science, and the *interpretive turn*, however, carry a somewhat narrower or more specific meaning. These terms all signal fundamental differences between the two sciences: The natural sciences explain the behavior of natural phenomena in terms of causes, and the human sciences interpret or understand the meaning of social *action*. (p. 133)

What I most want to emphasize, especially to the newcomers to qualitative inquiry is the word meaning. He used it three times in this passage, and as a clinician and researcher I have learned to attend to that which is repeated for its importance and for the meaning that it holds for the speaker.

In one of the big handbooks Schwandt (2000) writes of meaning (and action), again referring to it three times:

From an interpretivist point of view, what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful. . . .To find meaning in an action or to say one understands what a particular action means requires that one interpret in a particular way what the actors are doing. (p. 191)

Schwandt (2000) equates, or at least makes the intimate association, between meaning and interpretation at the same time that he makes the link between action (or behaviour) and interpreting (or understanding or making meaning)—that we interpret the meaning of behaviours. This is exactly the angle that Thorne (2008) is taking when she advises us on conducting interpretive description that has integrity, utility, and quality. What she does for the reader is adamantly repeat that this kind of inquiry is about describing interpretively what the researcher learns and understands about the meanings of practice situations. She supplies a simple definition of interpretive description to keep in the forefront of our minds:

Interpretive description is a qualitative research approach that requires an integrity of purpose deriving from two sources: (a) an actual practice goal, and (b) an understanding of what we do and don't know on the basis of the available empirical evidence (from all sources). (p. 35)

Interpretive research is defined, as all qualitative research, by the analyses conducted and the theoretical positioning from which the analysis is conducted. When speaking philosophically, paradigmatically, or theoretically (these words are frequently used interchangeably), interpretive research is often connected to hermeneutics, and constructivism (or constructionism; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) because of the role and responsibility the researcher has in creating the meanings attached to that which is being studied. Discussing interpretive social constructionism, Harris (2008), has noted that:

analyses tend to assume or argue that social phenomena are *interpreted* entities whose existence and qualities are dependent in large part on peoples' meaning-making practices. Human beings are construction workers in the sense that they create. . . [and] there is virtually always more than one way to define something. (p. 233)

Remember that Thorne's (2008) emphasis is on the applied nature of interpretive description, on focusing on a practice question of inquiry so that research is most useful to the practitioner with respect to the social nature of practical work and practical action. Supporting her stance and linking interpretation with practice, Holstein and Gubrium (2005) demonstrate the social and reciprocal nature of working interpretatively:

Interpretive practice engages both the *hows* and the *whats* of social reality; it is centered in both how people methodically construct their experience and their worlds, and in the configurations of meaning and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity. (p. 484)

So far I have only concentrated on the applied and interpretive aspects of Thorne's book. The word, descriptive is in the title as well and that deserves some attention. I think that descriptive is most related to the writing, to the presentation style. A basic understanding of description comes from Holstein and Gubrium (2005): "Description—This is the act of giving an account of that which we perceive" (p. 54). But Thorne (2008) is quick to say that description in practice is not enough, because in good practice we make sense of and attribute meaning to what we perceive and observe. I wholeheartedly agree. For practitioners, seeing or hearing something in our work is only a portion of what we actually do in practice. In order to take action we need to understand and make sense of what we see to make decisions, ask more questions, make plans, create solutions—apply knowledge. Thorne says it more eloquently in a formal definition.

Interpretive description is an approach to knowledge generation that straddles the chasm between objective neutrality and abject theorizing extending a form of understanding that is of partial importance to the applied discipline within the context of their distinctive social mandates. It responds to the imperative for informed action within the admittedly imperfect scientific foundation that is the lot of the human sciences. The methodological form that grew into what is now called interpretive description arose from a need for an applied qualitative research approach that would generate better understandings of complex experiential clinical phenomena within nursing and other professional disciplines concerned with applied health knowledge or questions 'from the field.' (pp. 26-27)

I have concentrated on what I have taken mainly from the early part of the book. Much of the qualitative processes that make up the majority of the book will look familiar to veterans and will be easy to comprehend for beginners—Thorne's gift is that for both groups the process of the methodological steps in interpretive work are grounded theoretically in practice and learning more about practice. So if you are a believer that what we do in practice is meaning-making and have questions arising from your field of practice, then this text can be your guide. And you will find that you, too, have made an intimate connection between applied and interpretive.

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### Author's Note

Sally is a career teacher. She taught junior high schoolers before teaching graduate students. She is very interested in the learning environment and developing ways to systematically inquire into and create teaching paradigms and practices that promote relevant learning. In addition, she encourages her students and colleagues to develop new and pertinent methods of conducting their own inquiries. Sally is an Associate Professor and the Director of Graduate Student Affairs at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Calgary Alberta Canada, T2N 1N4. Her email address is [stgeor@ucalgary.ca](mailto:stgeor@ucalgary.ca)

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