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## Grumpy Old Ethnographers: A Review of David Silverman 's A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research

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## Grumpy Old Ethnographers: A Review of David Silverman 's A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research

### Abstract

Renowned scholar of qualitative research methods David Silverman delivers an indictment of contemporary qualitative research methods. The book is meant to be an introduction (or "pre - textbook") to the subject of qualitative research and definitely not a "how - to" manual. In evaluating contemporary qualitative research methods, Silverman's book primarily focuses on ethnography and conversation analysis. Intentionally personal and biased, Silverman's plainly - stated goal for this book is to "debunk the accepted understandings" of qualitative research and elicit an interest in the arguments within the field of qualitative inquiry , and he succeeds on both accounts .

### Keywords

Qualitative Research Methods, Ethnography, Conversation Analysis

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## **Grumpy Old Ethnographers: A Review of David Silverman's *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research***

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Drawn by its whimsical title (the author admits stealing it from Chris Grey's *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Studying Organizations*), I picked up this book knowing little about the author. David Silverman, it turns out, is Professor Emeritus in the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths College, London, and a Visiting Professor at King's College and the University of Technology in Sydney. He is also the author and editor of a number of books and articles on qualitative methods. In short, he is a formidable expert in the field of qualitative research and specifically on ethnography and discourse analysis.

As a novice at qualitative research, I can't say I completely understand Silverman's arguments against traditional and contemporary qualitative research; Reading and rereading, however, both improved my understanding of qualitative research practices and raised new questions about current qualitative research methods.

Silverman states clearly that the book is meant to be an introduction (or "pre-textbook") to the subject of qualitative research and definitely not a "how-to" manual. Instead he appeals to the "wise(r) (and) brighter student" who should look for answers to larger questions such as the underlying tenets and current debates about the future direction of qualitative research. As such, its audience is likely those already familiar with qualitative research methods.

Intentionally personal and biased, Silverman's plainly-stated goal for this book is to "debunk the accepted understandings" of qualitative research. This is not your standard research methods textbook. In evaluating contemporary qualitative research methods, he primarily focuses on ethnography and conversation analysis, except when Silverman expounds (as he does frequently) on the misguided reliance on data from interviews and focus groups in qualitative research.

Throughout the text, Silverman acknowledges the significant influence of Harvey Sacks, an American sociologist who focused on the structure and sequence of conversations and essentially founded the field of conversation analysis, on his own work. In his brief academic career (he was killed in a car accident in 1975 at age 40), Sacks emphasized the importance for ethnographers of what may seem to be minor or irrelevant detail (such as the relationships among people in photographs or word sequences in text) in understanding why

people do and say and act in the ways they do, a concept that Silverman returns to throughout the book to support his arguments for his vision of strong qualitative research.

While recognizing that a good review should not simply recount the contents of each chapter, I think it is important for understanding this somewhat unusual text to provide a brief outline of Silverman's approach.

In Chapter One he uses photos and excerpts from novels, plays and social media to highlight the importance of seeing the remarkable in the mundane and the mundane in the remarkable. Everything we observe is imbued with meaning by social context, assumptions and categories and the goal of ethnography should be to understand these categories and when and how they are used (p. 6). Silverman notes that Sacks warned researchers to pay particular attention to the categories laypersons use and how they use them in describing experiences; Silverman adds that, "the study of how members of society use categories should make ethnographers very cautious of how they themselves use categories" (p. 25).

In Chapter Two Silverman begins his argument that contemporary qualitative research relies far too heavily on interviews and focus groups (which he refers to as "manufactured" or "provoked" data) as primary sources of data at the expense of "naturally-occurring data" such as conversations, advertisements, journals, blogs, and websites. Rather than asking people questions in order to understand their experiences, he suggests qualitative researchers should simply observe what people do and their implicit or explicit reasons for doing so. Silverman's reasoning is that questions and prompts from a researcher inevitably affect or even distort a respondent's original meaning, preventing the emergence of naturally-occurring data. Interviewers are at risk of ignoring "the way we shape our answers in terms of the question asked and in relation to how the questioner has been identified" (p. 58).

In Chapter Three he shifts focus from collecting data to data analysis. I must admit that this is the chapter that gave me the most difficulty and I was relieved to read at its end Silverman's acknowledgement of the complex nature of his approach to qualitative data analysis. He argues that too many qualitative researchers rely on extracts from their data to support their arguments without considering how both the questions they ask and the way in which they ask them impact responses. Understanding the conversational nature of interview data and, in particular, the sequence in which questions are asked and answered, is an important strength of sound qualitative research because it allows researchers to "address the 'whats' and 'hows' of interaction" rather than simply the "whys" (p. 84). It remains unclear throughout the chapter, however, exactly how this result is to be achieved.

In Chapter Four Silverman continues his observations on data analysis which seems also to be a sort of summary of his views on the relevance of qualitative research, in particular to policymakers and practitioners. Although this chapter is even more dense and impenetrable than the previous one, Silverman does provide helpful summaries of his main points: incorporating numbers in qualitative research can improve qualitative research's validity and relevance; ethnography can be useful to organizational analysis; and, one must always keep the audience in mind when writing and presenting the results of one's research.

While in previous chapters he somberly discuss data collection and analysis and the contributions qualitative research can make to society, Chapter Five is blessedly quirky and intentionally, a little saucy. Its irreverent sub-title, "On Bullshit and Tonsils," promises a clearer and more readable argument about the future of qualitative research but only partially delivers. With his claim that current qualitative research is full of "bullshit," Silverman says he means it is "overly jargonized and over-theorized" (p. 129). In addition, he opines current qualitative research focuses too often on feelings and lived experiences which Silverman likens to soap operas, therapy sessions, or reality TV (p. 134) and which, he asserts, puts contemporary qualitative research at risk of being dismissed as unscientific. In particular, he warns postmodern approaches to research such as performance ethnography, ethnodrama, and

poetry “can willingly lose contact with claims based on evidence and couched in propositional language” (p. 141).

Somewhat mystifyingly, Silverman concludes the penultimate chapter with the warning: “(I) ask you to remain cautious if you are persuaded by anything you have read here. My aim will not have been achieved if you simply accept anything that I have written” (p. 150). The very short final chapters restate the “dos and don’ts” of good qualitative research according to Silverman, affirms his identity as a “grumpy old man” (his term) and includes a helpful glossary of assumptions and practices to be avoided.

With this book it is Silverman’s explicit intention to go beyond basic texts on research methods and elicit an interest in the arguments within the field of qualitative inquiry. He acknowledges his bias and the fact that many scholars will undoubtedly disagree with all or most of the book’s contents. In this sense, Silverman has achieved his goal of challenging accepted understandings of qualitative research methods. On first reading, my heart sank at Silverman’s indictment of interview data because my doctoral research relies heavily on such data. But I have been prompted to consider other ways I could answer my own research questions and conduct my analysis, and for this I am grateful. It doesn’t really matter whether I like this book or not or whether I agree with Silverman’s arguments. I learned a lot from it.

### References

Silverman, D. (2007). *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about qualitative research*. London, Sage.

### Author Note

Rachel Fang is a PhD Candidate in the Housing Studies Department in the College of Design at the University of Minnesota where her research focuses on how the process of home foreclosure impacts family well-being. While she is using a mixed-methods approach, her primary data are interviews with homeowners who have experience with foreclosure. She may be contacted at Email: [fang0010@umn.edu](mailto:fang0010@umn.edu); Phone: 612-327-0006

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