

3-26-2012

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Recommended APA Citation

Parylo, O. (2012). Thorough and Thought-provoking: A Review of Packer's The Science of Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(13), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1792>

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Abstract

The conflict between qualitative and quantitative directions in educational research is not new; however, this debate has resurfaced in the accountability era. *The Science of Qualitative Research* by Martin Packer (2011) is a thought-provoking book that explains why one should engage in qualitative research. Artfully combining history, examples, and his own reflections on the topic, Packer offers a list of well-grounded arguments that show the importance of and the need for qualitative research. Although this book does not explain how to design and conduct qualitative studies, it makes a good read for all those interested in theories behind modern qualitative work and for those who want to better understand the roots of scientific social research and common misconceptions about qualitative analysis.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Analysis, Scientific Research, Social Science

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Thorough and Thought-provoking: A Review of Packer's *The Science of Qualitative Research*

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*The conflict between qualitative and quantitative directions in educational research is not new; however, this debate has resurfaced in the accountability era. *The Science of Qualitative Research* by Martin Packer (2011) is a thought-provoking book that explains why one should engage in qualitative research. Artfully combining history, examples, and his own reflections on the topic, Packer offers a list of well-grounded arguments that show the importance of and the need for qualitative research. Although this book does not explain how to design and conduct qualitative studies, it makes a good read for all those interested in theories behind modern qualitative work and for those who want to better understand the roots of scientific social research and common misconceptions about qualitative analysis. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Analysis, Scientific Research, Social Science.*

In educational research, the conflict between qualitative and quantitative inquiries, or so-called “paradigm wars,” has been the reality of the 1980s. However, by the end of that decade, the researchers seemed to have reached compromise and agreed that both types of research have their place and value (Bryman, 2006; Gage, 1989). Indeed, the two decades following the end of the paradigm wars have seen the increase in different forms and directions of qualitative research (Atkinson, 2005). Still, the overall picture is not so positive when one considers that it is quantitative experimental evidence-based research that is predominantly favored and funded by the governments and grant-funding agencies, especially given the requirements and goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (Baez & Boyles, 2009). As a result, the argument that dominated paradigm wars—conducting rigorous and scientific analysis—is back again on the center stage of the academic discussions surrounding educational research in the high-stakes, standards-based accountability environment. Central to this argument are the attempts to diminish the importance of qualitative research in favor of quantitative inquiry, perceived as more scientific and thus, more important to engage in (Denzin, 2009). In view of this claim, qualitative researchers responded with statements about the value, rigor, and importance of qualitative inquiry (Baez & Boyles, 2009; Denzin, 2010). One of the most recent, thorough, and thought-provoking books on the topic is *The Science of Qualitative Research* (Packer, 2011) that defends the right of qualitative work to exist and flourish by explaining why researchers should engage in qualitative inquiry.

Relatively large in size (about 400 pages), *The Science of Qualitative Research* consists of 15 chapters, grouped into three parts. In addition, the book includes an extended introduction detailing the focus, purpose, and structure of the book, a reference list, and the name and subject indexes. The first part, “The Objective Study of Subjectivity,” focuses on the prevailing methods of qualitative research—semi structured interviews and coding, examining them in light of the popular subjective-objective

dualism in research. The second part, “Ethnographic Fieldwork—The Focus on Constitution,” explores the concept of constitution introduced in part one and focuses on the intersubjective phenomena (i.e., language, culture, society) that are in the center of qualitative work. Finally, the third part, “Inquiry with an Emancipatory Interest,” examines different forms of critical analysis in qualitative research (i.e., emancipatory, Foucauldian, etc.).

While reading and reflecting on this book, I discerned five major themes central to its focus and content: (1) tracing the origins of scientific social research; (2) contrasting subjective experience and objective knowledge; (3) examining language as a central concept of qualitative inquiry; (4) rethinking qualitative research; and (5) searching for truth by asking ethical questions. These themes, supported by the key ideas expressed in this book, are discussed in detail in the remainder of this review.

Tracing the Origins of Scientific Social Research

To comprehend the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches and their application in social research, one has to understand the premises of these types of inquiry. In this book, Packer not only explains theories underlying qualitative work, but also examines important concepts of quantitative research that have laid the foundation of the paradigmatic wars and impacted qualitative analysis. To further readers’ understanding about the scientific directions in social research, Packer examines the origins of quantitative inquiry and its major goals and assumptions. By explaining the impact of Newton, Descartes, Einstein, and others on scientific investigation, Packer traces the roots of the preference for quantifiable research. Empirical, objective, driven by the research question, and supported by the chain of reasoning are the major characteristics that all scientific research is supposed to possess.

Along with examining these qualities of scientific research, Packer questions the prevailing assumption about qualitative work—qualitative inquiry can answer only descriptive questions. This deeply rooted belief resulted in common misconceptions about qualitative research perceived as non-scientific because it was not testing a hypothesis, but merely generating it. Furthermore, the acceptance of randomized clinical trial as the golden standard of social research has led to a limited view of research as a hypothesis-testing process, thus positioning qualitative inquiry outside the realm of bona fide scientific research. As a result, qualitative work is frequently seen as a descriptive process used to study experiences that may help to generate hypotheses to be later tested by valid, reliable, and replicable quantitative studies. However, Packer cautions that randomized clinical trial is not the most useful in social research that should be sensitive to cultural realities of society, not merely manipulating numbers taken out of context.

Contrasting Subjective Experience and Objective Knowledge

The long-standing dualism of subjectivity and objectivity has led to critiques of qualitative work for being very subjective. Packer offers a fresh look at subjectivity in research by examining the process of qualitative analysis in social research. To begin with, the focus of social research is often the examination of human subjective experiences and beliefs. In this process, the notion of subjectivity has a special place, as

all experiences are, in fact, subjective. However, the goal of research is to get at objective knowledge through the analysis of these expressions of subjectivity. Packer points out that we should acknowledge that the process of interpretation involved in qualitative research leads to themes that are reported in the findings. As such, these themes are the product of the researcher's interpretation that is affected by his or her subjectivity. Therefore, subjectivity is inherent in social research.

Furthermore, the notion of subjectivity is relevant to the coding and analysis process and to the data collected from the participants. However, the participants' subjectivity may be overcome if the researcher is using specific rules and procedures to guide the research. Packer warns that the attempts to eliminate all personal elements altogether are harmful as these elements frame social communication and existence. The topic of subjectivity is further examined through the lens of ethnography that allows researchers to immerse in a form of life while studying it. Packer argues that examining social interactions is not a weakness of social science; rather, it opens up new directions and possibilities and allows a fresh look at the culture and how it is created and communicated by the society members.

Examining Language as a Central Concept of Qualitative Inquiry

Being central to qualitative inquiry, language is also one of the major topics discussed in this book. Qualitative social research examines society either through the data collected from interviews or from observations. Being the most common data collection method, semi-structured interviews have been used for decades. Moreover, recognizing the important role of the interview in soliciting participant responses, quantitative researchers have attempted to standardize interview questions to make them work in surveys. However, Packer asserts that these attempts diminish the effectiveness of interview questions to collect valid and reliable information. Building on this argument, Packer describes interview as a collaborative effort of the parties involved because the conversations (and, therefore, meanings) are co-produced by the interacting people. This view of the conversation questions the usefulness of surveys in extracting the meanings people attribute to topics and events.

In the discussion of the role of language, the topic of subjectivity resurfaces. Packer asserts that people have and express subjective opinions and experiences and positions interview as a tool that allows researchers to access that subjectivity. In this situation, language comes to the forefront of attention as a way to express these subjective meanings. Throughout the book, Packer examines different theories that position language in the center of qualitative analysis. Transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, sociology of understanding of Schutz, phenomenology of Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, hermeneutics of Heidegger and ethnomethodology of Garfinkel—all focus on subjective representations and assume that the subject is located in objective reality. One example of qualitative inquiry closely examined in this book is hermeneutics, regarded as a study of interpretation. Discussing the philosophical roots of this genre, Packer asserts that hermeneutics has both subjective and objective components. Grounded in our understanding, interpretation is guided by our preconceptions, thus being subjective in nature. Such views on language and interpretation not only examine the place of

qualitative inquiry in social research, but also call for rethinking of the way qualitative research is conceptualized and conducted.

Rethinking Qualitative Research

With the definition of scientific research as objective, general, impersonal, and detached, it is hard to conceptualize this form of analysis as interpreting subjective experiences. In light of the preference for objective and replicable research, qualitative inquiry is becoming more like quantitative by pursuing validity and reliability requirements. To Packer, this situation calls for the reexamination of qualitative research. Acknowledging the crisis of representation in ethnography, Packer expresses the need to rethink the fieldwork, object of ethnography, participation, observation, and research writing. To support these calls, Packer points out the contradictions between objectivity and subjectivity and between participation and observation in qualitative research.

Positioning qualitative research as the objective study of subjectivity, Packer notes that qualitative analysis is rarely described in detail and thus, is often unclear. To back this claim, Packer examines several major books on qualitative research and shows that there are multiple (and often conflicting) definitions of qualitative coding. Asserting that with time, qualitative research becomes more like quantitative in its search for validity, generalizability, and standardization, Packer believes that qualitative research needs to be reconsidered. In the heart of this change should be the perception of interpretation as understanding. Thus, qualitative researchers should acknowledge their active involvement with the text at hand and pay careful attention to the language in order to gain a new understanding based on the problem being examined.

Searching for Truth by Asking Ethical Questions

Overall, the move to interpretive research is not unique to social science. Political science, sociology, and anthropology have also embraced interpretive research, acknowledging that positivism is unable to adequately examine cultural and social human practices and realities. In addition, Packer posits that social science is concerned with moral and interpretive inquiries. Given that reality is socially constructed, a different type of research is needed to properly examine it.

A fairly new dimension of qualitative social research is critiquing, aimed at emancipation. Within this direction, Packer examines the impact of Karl Marx, Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault on the development of critical theory. Critical inquiry is guided by the belief that there is no disinterested knowledge. Instead, knowledge is always value-laden, politically charged, and guided by the power relations that define order in every society. Proposing this new way to conducting research, Packer suggests this inquiry should be searching for truth, attempting to answer ethical questions that abound in social research.

Conclusion

In summary, *The Science of Qualitative Research* (Packer, 2011) is not a “how to do research” book and readers will find little to no information on how to collect, code,

analyze, or write up the findings. However, this book offers an explanation of why it is important to do qualitative work by exploring the history framing scientific social research. By combining the range of theories from different disciplines, this book makes an excellent textbook for beginners in social and behavioral sciences. Furthermore, this informative book will be useful for all those interested in different theories and methods framing qualitative inquiry. Specifically, this work would be particularly helpful for students employing qualitative methodologies and working on grounding their studies. Although this book covers many theories and methodologies, extensive background knowledge of the theorists and concepts is not required as Packer does a great job explaining in detail those topics required to understand the content. For readers' convenience and a quick reference, throughout the book there are boxes that summarize the central topics and tables that graphically present the major concepts. Finally, for a brief preview of Packer's book, readers can access the table of contents and parts of the introduction, and chapters one and two on the GoogleBooks website at http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Science_of_Qualitative_Research.html?id=fEPt0ePCQvUC

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Article Citation

Parylo, O. (2012). Thorough and thought-provoking: A review of Packer's *The Science of Qualitative Research*. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Rev. 4), 1-6. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/parylo.pdf>
