Expanding Qualitative Researchers' Worlds: A Review of David Silverman's Qualitative Research

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Abstract

A collection of 26 chapters dealing with a host of topics in qualitative research (QR) under the scholarly authority of David Silverman, a putative scholar in the field of QR is to focus of my book review. While reading the book chapters I realized how colorful QR had become in recent years and how many methodologies exist today for those of us who are eager to move their research program a step further. Personally, as a qualitative researcher who has used mostly semi-structure interviews in his researches, the book challenged me to think of employing other methodologies because the world in which we live is not only verbal, but also visual, virtual, and manifold. My review attempts to deliver my thoughts and impressions when reading this brilliant collection of qualitative perspectives and methodologies.

Keywords

Interviews, Focus Groups, Ethnography, Digital Research, Visual Data, Qualitative Data Analysis

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There were many books on the table in the closing session at the 2017 conference of *The Qualitative Report* in Florida to be taken by participants who wanted to write a book review. For some unknown reasons, my hand laid down on a very thick book, with a very short and banal title – *Qualitative Research* (QR; Silverman, 2016), whose content comprises 26 chapters, all of which deal with multiple views and methodologies in the qualitative paradigm.

Browsing quickly in the book chapters, my natural response would be to leave it on the table and move to another book. So I asked myself what I could learn from another compilation of chapters about qualitative inquiry. After all, I have read so much since my PhD studies many years ago, I have conducted many qualitative studies over two decades ago. But, something told me to hold the book in my arms and not to let others to take it. Now, after reading the book, I feel I was lucky to choose it and it is my intention here to share my intellectual journey with the readers of QR.

Very reasonably, I decided to read the introduction to find my way in this varied compilation as well as to mentally distinguish the book from those I had used for a long time. The editor – Silverman – was very sharp just at the beginning of the chapter, indicating that the book "provides a guide to the latest development in QR written by internationally recognized authors in their field" (p. 3). But, I thought to myself, every author of such a book "promises" to provide a guide…so what's new here? But, then, I felt the author could trace my thoughts because he went on to "declare" that the book overcomes several erroneous conjectures about QR such as that "doing research is purely a matter of learning a few techniques," "that QR is just about understanding people's experiences," and that "QR is not rigorous." Fantastic, I thought to myself, a great book, but how does it differ from previous editions? Here again, the author seems to have followed my thoughts; chapters from the previous editions were revised and updated by their authors and the new edition includes new technologies and new sources of date, new topics, new authors, ethical considerations and so on.

For a shortage of space, I could not review every chapter in the book, so I decided to focus on those that caught my interest or those that focused on a new aspect of QR. Thus, Bloor's chapter about addressing social problems through qualitative research took me back to well-known debates about the contribution of higher education to the society. The chapter

explores two case studies which illustrate how qualitative researchers who wish to address social problems to conduct research of much practical benefits to policy-makers. As academics are usually required to publishing papers in high prestigious journals for its own sake, the table in the last page that summaries how researchers might influence on practitioners' practices (e.g., stimulating interest in our findings while collecting data in the field, providing rich descriptions of everyday practice found in the study) made me think about the purpose of my own work and feel very frustrated about the over-emphasis given in our academic world to "pure" knowledge production rather than to an applied one.

Three chapters dealt with in-depth and active interviews, but I was curious to know more about focus groups, probably because I had only one study that employed this research method. Wilkinson presented two different approaches to analyzing focus group data, illustrating them through her study with women with breast cancer. Focus groups differ from qualitative interview in that the moderator does not ask each focus group participants questions in turn, but rather facilitates group discussion and actively encourages each group member to interact with each other. At this point I was very satisfied as this was exactly what I did in my own research several years ago. But, then, Wilkinson taught me that content analysis is not the only way to analyze focus group data, as many believe. Through her experience, I learned the merits of ethnographic analysis that is more suitable when the studies "aim to provide contextual, interpretive accounts of their participants' social worlds" (p. 88). Much of the chapter was devoted to guide those of us in the technical aspects of ethnographic analysis, a very useful didactic chapter, indeed.

My journey continued until my eyes fell on chapter 8 that focuses on organizational ethnography, a title that seem to pertain to my own field of study – educational administration and organization. Very interestingly, Eberle and Maeder distinguished between organizational ethnography and general ethnography and considered how the former relates to organizational theory. Curious to understand the distinctive features of organizational ethnography I kept reading the chapter, learning that it is a multi-method approach, like any other ethnography, that differs from the classical ethnographies conducted in tribal societies in terms of cultural and geographical distance. An organizational ethnographer does not need to travel far away to an alien society, but lives not far away from the researched organization, enters the field only sporadically, and enjoys multiple leisure time activities in between as the other members of the organization do. Maybe, I thought to myself, I should start combining ethnography in my own research on school management. Here again, the authors provided me with practical guidelines of doing this method, such as how to access the field, collect data, and write the report.

Satisfied with my new insights into this methodology I had not been aware of enough, I kept reading the book chapters, learning more about document analysis of texts and words and about conversation analysis, that "involves extracting the practice from a large variety of contexts in order to establish the extent to which it is context-free" (p. 207). But, what caught my eyes was the section about digital, virtual research, a new topic for me, probably because I became unconsciously a "traditional" qualitative researcher. Thus, as a medium for communication, the internet provides multiple means and modes of interaction, offering many opportunities to communicate with participants, to study cultural formations in online places, or to analyze the sociality of people chatting about a political event. Reading the chapters in this section provided me with much knowledge about the challenges the Internet provides to qualitative researchers, ethical considerations of internet research, the different types of online interviews, the challenges of analyzing online data, and the ways by which methodological aspects of critical discourse studies might be applied to social media data.

In my course about educational leadership, I present portraits and pictures of great leaders in world history, on one hand, and of school principals, on the other hand. Through these pictures the students try to understand the power of leaders, their influence, their story,

and so on. Add to this the videos of leaders' speeches in the streets, and the learning experience is apparently theatrical and melodramatic. With this experience in mind, I started reading the seventh section – visual data. From Emmison's chapter, I learned that a common feature of virtually all existing modes of visual inquiry is that "they focus in some way upon the generation, use and analysis of photographic and other forms of images" (p. 297), and also about the need to think of visual inquiry as embracing more than the study of images. I felt that the pictures in Heath's chapter about video and the analysis of social interaction, in which a speaker's gestures are numbered and analyzed, worth more than thousands words; they simply transmit the essence of visual research visibly. Personally speaking, I thought that a visual research about my own teaching skills could help me very much as it enables tracing every movement in my hands, voice, and body, and could tell me more about the way I deliver knowledge in my class.

The final section – qualitative data analysis addresses issues of grounded theory analysis, narrative inquiry, secondary analysis, and validity. One chapter caught my eyes again – systematic reviews and qualitative studies (Dixon-Woods) because I personally like the challenge of reviewing areas of study in my field, and have always found it more complex to review qualitative findings. Thus, I gained much knowledge about the dilemmas reviewers might face when handling qualitative studies; what are the data in QR – only quotes, field notes, interpretations? The beauty of QR that creates manifold, colorful findings makes it hard to categorize qualitative findings according to a predetermined set of criteria as happens in meta-analysis of quantitative data. And maybe we have to question the need to systematically categorize reviewed study…

So, after closing the book, I thought how much impressed I am from the editing work done to create such a brilliant collection of chapters. I could easily agree with the positive comments on the blurb, and especially with what Barbara Czariniawsak wrote: "This book contains everything that a qualitative researcher needs to know and a qualitative researcher needs to learn." Indeed, as a qualitative researcher I found the book an opportunity to learn the diverse nature of QR beyond my own focus on qualitative interviewing and discovered new methodological directions. It provided me with ideas for further research in my field based on visual methods, internet communication, ethnography, and focus groups.

But, no text is perfect. I felt a sense of not seeing the forest for the (many) trees, not because the editor did not divide the book chapters into well-defined sections, but rather due to a lack of systematic modelling of the ideas brought up in the book chapters at the beginning of the book that could help me follow the varied developments in QR and find a common lines among them. Alternatively, an epilogue summarizing the scholarly and methodological contributions of this collection to QR could help me comprehend the book more systematically than fragmentally.

References

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Author Note

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