

Review:

David Aldridge

Michael Huberman & Matthew B. Miles (Eds.) (2002). *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 410 pages, ISBN 0761911901 (cloth), £ 41.00, ISBN 0-7619-1191-X (paper), £ 18.99

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Abstract: A companion is traditionally a secondary piece of work that accompanies the main texts of a discipline. Qualitative research now has such a foundation of work that we can begin to see the production of secondary literature. This book contains a selection of important writings from the broad literature relating to social science research as it is applied in qualitative research. The selection of included chapters was made from a possible battery of one thousand titles! There are three main sections to the book. Section one is concerned with looking at how we weave concepts together and develop theories that, in turn, influence research design. Section two addresses itself directly to methodological issues focusing, among other matters, on establishing credibility, avoiding bias and generalizing from small-scale studies. Section three takes six empirical studies from varying qualitative approaches and presents them as examples of how to do a qualitative study well. This is a valuable resource book providing some pertinent examples of research thinking and practice. The quality of writing is high.

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1. The Companion as Secondary Source

A companion is traditionally a secondary piece of work that accompanies the main texts of a discipline. Qualitative research now has such a foundation of work that we can now begin to see the production of secondary literature. No doubt, we will see in the future a selection of companions with which we can travel along the research highways. As a supervisor of research studies, students often ask me to recommend material, so this volume of collected writings came along at the right time. These authors had previously provided us with a substantial book, "Qualitative Data Analysis," first published in 1984 and updated in 1994. The new companion volume offers a set of readings that includes some of the outstanding contributing names in social science research. There are chapters from EISENHARDT, VAN MAANEN, LOFLAND, DENZIN, and LINCOLN and GUBA amongst others, distilled from more than a thousand candidate pieces of

contemporary writings about qualitative research. It already sounds like "Qualitative Research's Greatest Hits." Like compilation record albums, the quality throughout is mainly good with occasional lapses, although we may differ about the selections. Given that there was such choice, the editors assemble an exemplary compilation. As each section is coherent, the varying authorial styles lend interesting and differing voices that contribute to a symphony of ideas. [1]

There are three main sections to the book, ranging from the abstract to the concrete. Section one is concerned with looking at how we weave concepts together and develop theories that, in turn, influence research design. Section two addresses itself directly to methodological issues focusing, among other matters, on establishing credibility, avoiding bias and generalizing from small-scale studies. Section three takes six empirical studies from varying qualitative approaches and presents them as examples of how to do a qualitative study well. [2]

2. Is it Credible?

I must admit to reading this book from a biased perspective, as I am writing an article concerning subjective data and validity; the issues of validity, or authenticity, were present as I read. Throughout this book we find credibility, authenticity, generalizability and quality as constantly recurring themes. In some ways, this presents a unity to the thinking and probably reflects the concerns that most of us have in supervising research practice. [3]

2.1 Theory and concepts

Kathleen EISENHARDT's chapter is important to the way in which we approach case study designs in terms of building theory and how those theories are then related to a broader social science perspective. With an eye open for potential study material for researchers, this chapter is perfect in its practicality. EISENHARDT addresses the problems of case selection, the possibility of combining multiple data collection methods and the way in which those data sets can be related to each other—making the necessary distinctions between within-case data and cross-case searches for patterns. She makes a very important point about the use of extant literature as it relates to theory building by referring to "enfolding literature" (p.24). This is a very nice way of seeing the literature as an opportunity to understand our own results as well as conflicting material. This concept of enfolding literature is very useful for academic supervisors needing an example of a literature review within a piece of qualitative research. [4]

John VAN MAANEN's chapter on organizational ethnography, based on his study of police agencies, is truly a classic, an example of how to write clearly and vividly. His remarks about the tentative nature of the conclusions reached through ethnography demonstrate his modesty; they also show the authority that comes from understanding the nature of the material thoroughly and the depth of the corresponding theory. [5]

Joseph MAXWELL offers a typology of validity categories that is all encompassing and suitably grounded in practice. It is possible to relate his abstractions to the real world of everyday research and how we handle the matter of validity. First, he reminds us that it is not data that is valid but the inferences we draw from them and these are related to the community of inquirers to whom we belong or to whom we are addressing. He then goes on to offer five categories of validity; descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability and evaluative validity (p.43). Whether the reader chooses to accept or reject these categories is debatable, but the author does offer a categorical scheme of increasing interpretive abstraction with which we can get to grips. [6]

Martyn HAMMERSLEY presents a chapter on ethnography and realism in which the compatibility of realism and constructivism are discussed in a straightforward way. While the author calls for a philosophical perspective, the material itself is not particularly inspiring when he urges us to understand rather than to judge other people's beliefs (p.67) and to "... define knowledge as beliefs about whose validity we are reasonably confident" (p.73). This is an example of a chapter that lapses from the otherwise high quality of argument in other chapters. [7]

"Real men don't collect soft data" is the title of a chapter by Silvia GHERARDI and Barry TURNER that surely deserves the award for one of the best chapter titles ever invented for qualitative research. The contents are interesting too as the authors return us to the actual research process, rather than the mythical idealized version we are often encouraged to imagine in writing proposals or justifying projects. Breakdowns in the process are seen simply as part of the journey where we are literally discovering things for the first time. This metaphor reminded me of mountain climbers, who, seeming well prepared, are nonetheless confronted with daunting obstacles that could not have been foreseen. The same applies to many of my research students who plan their studies, but come up against the vagaries of everyday life in research. It is these very challenges that bring us to new understandings. Later in the chapter, the authors also tackle incorporating quantitative data into the ascent of the icy face of the data mountain, emphasizing that the use of numbers is a metaphor and that numbers exist only in a context. This chapter fits well with the other chapters in this section without direct reference to them but through a similar stance. [8]

2.2 Making sense of data

Section two concerns itself with methodological perspectives. Catherine RIESSMAN's chapter on narrative analysis is a pragmatic chapter on making sense of data. LINCOLN and GUBA provide a short chapter on how to judge the quality of case study reports. The chapter takes the high-moral ground, telling us what we should be doing in a way that made me wonder if any of us could ever aspire to such perfection. We are recommended to display courage and egalitarianism in studies that will empower, activate and stimulate the reader. While these are indeed the basics of academic work, the way that the chapter is written is a little too evangelical for my taste. Similarly, the statement "... case

studies will rhetorically exemplify the interpersonal involvement which characterized that form of inquiry" (LINCOLN & GUBA, p.214) is a typical example of obscurantism. John LOFLAND writes about analytic ethnography and Janet SCHOFIELD discusses how generalizability can be increased. LOFLAND reminds us of a number of GOFFMANesque terms that will resonate with many of us as qualitative researchers: "unfettered inquiry," "deep familiarity," "emergent analysis" and "true content," each of which is a call to us as researchers to free ourselves from having to prove ourselves useful in society. Given that one of the practicalities of everyday research is finding funding, justifying qualitative research through its applicability becomes an example of fettered inquiry from which few of us can easily break free. SCHOFIELD offers the counter-argument to LOFLAND that we have to demonstrate how our work will speak beyond the immediately studied situation. To achieve this end of extended applicability several recommendations are made: studying the typical, the common and the ordinary; performing multi-site studies; recognizing ideal situations and then examining them to see what is actually going on; and, finally, aggregating a number of studies that are compared and contrasted. Essentially, this is an argument for case study research and meta analysis. [9]

2.3 The real thing

Section three is a selection of six chapters, four of which are separate empirical studies. Each study is concisely written and offers a model of clear conceptual writing illustrated by empirical material. [10]

Using a phenomenological analysis that is both concise and elegant, FISCHER and WERTZ present a stunning account of being criminally victimized. If anyone is looking for a prime example of "How to write up phenomenological material," this is it, if only for the way that data is condensed. In their chapter about policy research, RITCHIE and SPENCER provide a systematic mapping of concepts. Again, we see a very clear example of how to present condensed data—this time not in a phenomenological sense, but rather as tables, schematic diagrams and frameworks. [11]

DENZIN provides a short chapter on a six-phase path in the interpretive process, which is interesting in itself, but I cannot see how it fits into this part of the book. The six phases are: framing the research questions, deconstructing and analyzing critically prior conceptions, capturing the phenomenon in the natural world, bracketing the phenomenon from the natural world, putting that phenomenon back together in terms of its essential parts and relocating the phenomenon back into the social world (pp.349-350). Indeed, the value of the book is that we discern the difference between the abstract and the concrete. In teaching qualitative research, I often find that students fail to be able to make this judgment and it is strange that the editors have included this albeit valuable chapter in this part. [12]

Celia ORONA, using a grounded theory approach, writes about temporality and identity loss due to Alzheimer's disease. Such a contribution is welcome for its

simplicity. How to write up what is often a complex study (and all too often has taken up a substantial part of the researcher's life) in a few pages is a daunting task. Yet, ORONA manages this in a straightforward way, balancing method, analysis and discussion in an uncomplicated manner. [13]

The third section concludes with a chapter of advice and emphasizing research as a craft from MILES and HUBERMAN, both of whom died before the book was published. We could say exactly the same thing about the craft of research writing as it is exemplified in this book. Furthermore, we also have a wonderful example of the skill of editing. [14]

3. Evaluation

This is a valuable piece of work as secondary literature. I have already recommended chapters to at least two of my doctoral students as a validation of their own thinking and as a reference point for their writing. In the final section of empirical studies, we find examples of well-written qualitative research material. These provide invaluable examples of succinct writing that focus on conveying only that which is necessary—good examples for other authors. The same could be said of most of the other chapters that are written in a coherent style. Despite a plethora of variation in chapters, the book remains unitary and, for that, we must give credit to the editors. The book acts as a methodological base camp for those setting out to challenge the "mountain climb" of their own research "Everests." It provides examples of both good writing and skilled and elegant editing. When we think of some of the qualitative research compilations that are weighing down our bookshelves, this volume is singled out as making an important contribution to the field, enhancing our abilities as researchers in clear decision-making and in presentation of coherent sets of ideas. [15]

Author

David ALDRIDGE is an art educator trained as a social scientist and has the Chair for Qualitative Research in Medicine at the University Witten Herdecke in Germany. His books include his original ethnomethodological work on suicide (from an ecosystemic perspective), complementary medicine, spiritual healing and music therapy. He is particularly interested in the analysis of visual materials, including photographs, videotape material and film. His doctoral students have their backgrounds in medicine, music therapy, art therapy, nursing and education.

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