A Review of Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology

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Published online: 12 Dec 2014.

To cite this article: Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini & Golnaz Shafaghiha (2014): A Review of Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology, The Journal of Social Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/00224545.2014.978633

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2014.978633
BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CONTINUES TO GAIN increasing momentum in the face of the traditionally reigning positivist research, but the qualitative trend still needs to develop stronger stems. Carla Willig’s contribution to this development in the field of psychology has been fairly extensive, with her earlier works including the co-edited *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2008) as well as *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, the third edition of which we review here. “Since life does not stop until it stops” (p. xi), as Willig herself mentions, the third edition of the book has been expanded mainly by the influence of author’s own therapeutic practice. After a 5-year interval, the new edition uses a more systematic approach of organization to blend the practical and theoretical issues of qualitative research in psychology. The discussions of earlier editions have been restructured and extended through various examples and updated methodologies have been included in the body of the book.

In an attempt to reflect the growth in the psychological domain of qualitative research, in addition to the extensive coverage of challenging conceptual and theoretical issues, the most commonly used methods in present-day psychology teaching are centrally included in this title. Specifically, in the conceptual section of the book, three chapters have been added on the Epistemological Bases for Qualitative Research, on The Role of Interpretation, and on Putting Together a Research Proposal. As for methods, three new chapters have been added that address...
Thematic Analysis, Narrative Analysis and Visual Methodologies. The book enjoys clearly structured chapters with each chapter including a list of learning objectives, a stepwise presentation of the main issues, a concluding section, discussion questions and an up-to-date list of resources for further reading. Throughout each chapter, examples aid readers in grasping the complexities of each concept. Moreover, adding a cyber-space dimension, study resources such as chapter-by-chapter multiple-choice and essay-type questions as well as chapter glossaries are provided in the online learning center of the book the links of which are provided at the end of each chapter.

Willig offers a balance between theoretical issues and practical tasks in the composition of the three main parts of this edition all three equally strong in their structure and arrangement of discussions: Conceptual Preparation, Doing Research and Reflections and Conclusions. Part One is mainly devoted to theoretical issues. Through different empirical documentations, the five chapters of this part conceptually prepare the readers who are mainly expected to be novice researchers in the field and thus to need to familiarize themselves with fundamental concepts of qualitative research. Notions such as hypothetico-deductivism, social constructionism and epistemology, often forbidding for beginner qualitative researchers, are well described and put into context. The chapters of this part especially deal with the tricky qualitative research design and data exploration and conceptually spell out different types of interviewing, participant observation, diaries and focus groups as well as more complex conceptions such as visual methods and grounded theory (later discussed in more details in separate chapters of Part Two).

The last two chapters of the first part are among the new additions to this edition and deal with interpretation and research proposals. In the chapter on The Role of Interpretation, the author acquaints her novice readers with epistemological positions and approaches to interpretation, admirably stating that “[i]mplicit within the researcher’s decisions about how to conduct the research is their orientation to the interpretative endeavor.” (p. 45). She makes a distinction between empathic and suspicious types of interpretation and elaborates on ethical issues such as the problematic of “the ownership of interpretation.” In the closing chapter of the first part titled Putting Together a Research Proposal, different parts of a research proposal are described and explained based on the consideration that a “research proposal is important as a process and as a product” (p. 53). Apart from the role of the proposal as a product that obtains official approval and convinces others that the proposed research is worthwhile, the process of writing a detailed research proposal is argued to help researchers go beyond a mere research idea and to consider the details in a systematic way.

Part Two as the main body of the volume focuses on conducting the actual research. The chapters in this part present eight approaches to qualitative research methods and provide in-depth discussions on how and when they may be used. Each chapter elaborates on the aims, principles, procedures, techniques and limitations of a particular methodological approach and discussions are supported by examples of detailed case studies. Besides grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis that shape the themes of this part of the book, thematic analysis, narrative analysis and visual methods are novel trends that have been added to the book in this most recent edition. The chapter on Thematic Analysis introduces this approach as an underpinning for most other methods of qualitative data analysis and describes it as the “product of a combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, as well as the ability to systematically yet creatively thematize and interpret data” (p. 66). Among the strengths of the discussions on thematic analysis is elaborating on the distinction between
inductive and deductive thematic analysis and, more importantly, highlighting that it is not a how-to-do type of technique but a position that relies on a deep understanding of research questions and their implications for data analysis.

The chapters on Grounded Theory Methodology and Phenomenological Methods depict a general overview of these two challenging concepts and do this successfully. With regard to grounded theory, the concerned chapter celebrates Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) and puts emphasis on the idea that the approach “provides us with a set of procedures, which are ways of putting into practice the requirement to actively engage in close and detailed analysis of your research materials, so that they can both stimulate and discipline the theoretical imagination” (p. 80). As another prominent point of this part of the book, the chapter on Case Studies has improved in this edition, as Willig has included issues of ethical and epistemological difficulties to this section. The two chapters on Discursive Psychology and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis explore discourse analysis as a way of understanding psychological phenomena and dwell on some details of these approaches. Part of this attempt is seen in a subsection on Procedural Guidelines for the Analysis of Discourse that provides steps to “map some of the discursive resources used in a text and the subject positions they contain, and to explore their implications for subjectivity and practice” (p. 117). The detailed consideration of discursive qualitative research, otherwise not fitting an introductory book, may be traced back to the authors’ interest in discourse analysis in psychological research (e.g. Willig, 1999, 2003).

The last two chapters of this part are contributed by Joanna Silver. The chapter on Narrative Psychology is an extended and updated version of Willig’s second-edition chapter titled Working with Memories. In this new version, more weight has been given to narrative analysis and different types of narratives and their specific functions are illustrated. As for Visual Methods, Silver has skillfully depicted a fresh view of including visual data such as photographs, films and drawings within the process of dealing with data. This is argued to aid linguistic data, which can be analyzed by means of other approaches such as grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis and discursive psychology. Among other things, the chapter highlights the consideration that images “cannot not speak for themselves” (p. 163) and that they should be interpreted and this puts the burden of decision on the researcher’s shoulder as to the weight attributed to images as visual data.

The final part of the book is composed of two chapters, one dealing with Quality in Qualitative Research and the other presenting some review notes and conclusions. The problematic of qualitative research quality is discussed based on a few main questions: “How do we decide what makes a good qualitative study? How do we select appropriate criteria to evaluate qualitative research? And to what extent is it possible to establish guidelines for evaluating qualitative research in general?” (p. 169). The discussions, though obviously necessary, seem to leave novice researchers far from equipped with enough ability to fully understand or to justify the quality and trustworthiness of their research. In an attempt to sum up the entire book, the last chapter attends to the issue of “off-the-shelf methodologies” and questions the concept of methodolatry as the tendency to overly rely on ready-made and recipe-like information about research methods. Moreover, in this last chapter Willig introduces a number of computer software for qualitative analysis and, finally, reflects upon the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research, concluding that “recent trend towards pluralism and dual focus approaches heralds an opening that qualitative psychologists are increasingly moving beyond ‘methodolatry’ and methodological orthodoxies in the pursuit of a fuller understanding of the human condition.” (p. 183).
Three appendices accompany this edition of *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*: a grounded-theory-based study of drug users’ experiences; an interpretative phenomenological analysis and photo elicitation study of the experiences of patients with body dysmorphic disorder; and a Foucauldian discourse analysis of constructing self-harm. The book ends with a rich collection of references followed by a subject index. This is a useful read for students and novice researchers who want to understand and conduct qualitative research. This new edition enjoys a feature of flow and balance and the systematic structure of the book with its in-depth case examples makes the concepts accessible for students, although some crucial aspects of qualitative research like data collection could have been considered more intimately. Therefore, one may hardly be able to evaluate the book as a comprehensive introduction to qualitative research for real beginners but it has its own strengths that put it at the same scale with similar books like those edited by Fischer (2006) and Forrester (2010). Keeping the expectations at the level of an *introducing* type of text, with many of the key challenges of qualitative research processes touched by the author, the contribution of the volume extends beyond the field of psychology. Considering the conversational style of the book that engages readers with challenging concepts of research mostly through fairly plain language, novice researchers and students from other disciplines of humanities and social sciences may also find the contents useful.

**AUTHOR NOTES**

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