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Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods

Smith, Jonathan A (ed.)

Sage Publications, London (2015) ISBN: 9781446298466 (pb)
Reviewed by Louise Folkes, Cardiff University

In an early quote in this book highlighting the key elements of social psychology “A concentration on human *experience* as the central topic of psychology or a focus on *construction* or *interpretation* seems, for us, to lead, almost inevitably to qualitative research” (p.5), we could replace ‘psychology’ with ‘sociology’ and the statement would still make sense. This illustrates the close link between social psychology and key streams within sociology, and justifies reviewing this book in *Sociological Research Online*.

For early researchers who are new to working within a qualitative paradigm, this edited volume is an essential starting point. In its third edition, and with two new chapters on ‘Thematic Analysis’ and ‘Choosing your approach’, the book highlights the continued support and expansion of qualitative methods in psychology. The highly accessible manner in which each chapter is written, alongside clear, worked-out examples of how to actualise each approach is comforting for those whose first methodological language is not qualitative psychology. Its highly practical orientation means that this book provides an introductory toolkit for those embarking on qualitative research methods in psychology for the first time.

Following the introductory chapter, we begin with a theoretical positioning of qualitative psychology, and how this differs from the dominant epistemology of traditional experimental psychology. Essentially placed as the first substantial chapter, this plants the seed for early consideration of both epistemological and ontological questions that will arise from the approaches in the following chapters. The next three chapters, ‘Interpretive phenomenological analysis’; ‘Grounded theory’; and ‘Narrative psychology’ cover the approaches aimed at producing a deep understanding of experience and creation of analytical theory. Next we move onto discourse and linguistic based methodologies, ‘Conversation Analysis’ and ‘Discourse Analysis’, which provide accessible guidance into the specificities of these more constructionist approaches. Leaving methodology behind, the following three chapters appear to be explicitly *methods* focused, although this distinction is not boldly highlighted in the contents- ‘Cooperative inquiry: an action research practice’, ‘Focus groups’, and ‘Thematic analysis’. These chapters are cautious of subscribing to any particular epistemological viewpoint by emphasising their versatility. The final two chapters really do capture the practical essence of the book and are essential chapters to help early researchers think through their research- ‘Choosing an approach’ and ‘Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology’.

What is striking about the very broad contents of this book is perhaps what is not included. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) in particular have been influential in the revival of psychoanalytical approaches and concepts within qualitative psychology. It is also interesting to note the absence of visual and creative approaches to research, with the dominant focus on written and spoken discourse. For vulnerable groups or work with children, creative methods may help overcome barriers presented by reliance on linguistic expression (Mannay 2010). Of course, the entire of qualitative psychology cannot be covered in one book, but it does seem a shame to exclude these more contemporary additions to the area.

As the sole purpose of this book is to provide (primarily) undergraduates with accessible and practical information on how to undertake these approaches, a few approaches do seem rather large and complex to tackle in the small amount of time undergraduates have for their dissertation projects. For instance, ‘Narrative psychology’ would provide students with large quantities of rich data which would require a lot of time to transcribe and analyse, whilst ‘Discourse analysis’, which covers both discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis, is a highly complex and difficult approach to utilise, especially with the ambiguity around the stages of analysis. A further practical issue is highlighted in the ‘Conversation analysis’ chapter which fails to address the ethical issue around the collection of naturally occurring data. This is not to say that undergraduates should not attempt these approaches, but that they will find it challenging to grasp in an often short time scale.

In summary, *Qualitative Psychology* is a great example of an accessible introductory textbook into qualitative methodologies which early researchers can dip in and out of as necessary. In an era with growing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research it is worthwhile for sociologists to reflect on the way related disciplines view and use qualitative methods we view as ‘our own’. I would recommend this book not only to new qualitative researchers, but also to those who are familiar with qualitative methods in psychology, in order to get a basic grounding in a variety of approaches. Despite the criticisms highlighted in this review, this does not take away from the overall value of this book to those early in their research careers.

References

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research differently: A psychosocial approach*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Mannay, D. (2010). Making the familiar strange: can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible? *Qualitative Research* 10(1): p. 91-111.