

A Review of *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide*

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Jane Mills' and Melanie Birks' (2014) recently published *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide* is aptly titled and will appeal to several audiences, including beginning researchers, instructors of research methods courses, thesis supervisors, and any scholar motivated to “brush up” their grasp of major qualitative methodologies. At the heart of the text is the qualitative research process. The editors' approach is not esoteric, but rather fulfills the promise of providing historical background, philosophical groundwork, and recommendation steps to take for research in “real life” contexts. My reading of the text began with a perusal of the reference lists following each chapter, lists that included all of the names one might expect to find in an essential reading list in qualitative research methodologies. The extra-textual aspects alone warrant a recommendation to read the book; however, a deeper reading lead to deeper appreciation for the layers of meaning at work in the text. I will begin with an overview of the contents and commentary on its structure, highlight the some of the key features of the chapters and Part 2, and end by returning to why various audiences are likely to find this an indispensable text for a qualitative research library.

First, the organization and structure of the book uses the best features of the textbook genre to good advantage. Each chapter contains the conventions of the genre: objectives, introductions, examples, questions, and summaries. The glossary and index are comprehensive and useful. The chapter titles are accurate, the language is accessible, and the repetition of key elements, such as the “Window into ...” sections provides structural continuity between chapters. None of these features are new for a discerning reader or writer of textbooks; the notable distinction is that the writing is fresh and engaging throughout. Written in three parts, the editors begin Part 1 with an overview of qualitative research, followed by an articulation of practical philosophy and conclude with an exposition of the difference between methodology and methods. The overview ranges from the broad sweep of social and academic history to specific advice on writing a qualitative research question. Chapter 2, “Practical Philosophy,” could not be more ambitious because the history of the discipline, the definition of key terms, and the connections between philosophy and research are explained concisely in mere pages. The statement, “Philosophy is what makes a set of methods a methodology” (p.24) illustrates the confidence and clarity of the editors' approach. They are keen to dispel misconception and confusion. The primary intended audience, those interested in the “early stages of designing a qualitative research study,” never seems far from the editors' imagination, as illustrated by specific references such as “you the researcher” or step-by-step bullets plans for each aspect of a research project which characterize the book. It would be possible to read and benefit from any of the chapters independently, but read as a whole, the reader comes away with a concise, comprehensive look at qualitative research.

Part 2 is a collection of chapters devoted to the major fields in qualitative research, including action research, discourse analysis, critical ethnography, grounded

theory, historical research, case study, narrative research, and phenomenology. Noted researchers from each field are responsible for the respective chapters, which accounts for the quality, clarity, and insightful analysis evident in each one. The grounded theory chapter, quite understandably, was written by the editors, Mills and Birks, whose (2011) *Grounded theory: A Practical Guide*, followed a similar pattern. They have developed a formula that works. Each chapter in this section follows a familiar course, a history of the methodology, its philosophical origins and methodological implications, and the invaluable “positioning of the researcher” section that predicts the demands of the methodology on the researcher. This technique, explaining how the researcher works through the methodology, allows the reader to imagine how each particular methodology might be experienced. All chapters include a “window into” the methodology section, which serves to illuminate the approach. Each “window” has associations with equally prominent researchers from the respective fields. The expert researchers address lingering concerns associated with the qualitative methodologies, such as “quality and rigour,” ethics, and specific on-going critiques. The formula is not tiresome, but rather, invites comparisons between methodologies and shows how acutely important having the right fit of philosophy, methodology, and method is to successful research.

Part 3 focuses on first steps for researchers who presumably have made an informed choice about the methodology most appropriate for their research project, question, or puzzle. At the very least, the serious reader of the book will have an understanding of what approach best aligns with their positioning as a researcher. As promised in Chapter 2, “The ability to answer questions regarding your philosophical position will guide how you position yourself as a researcher and, in turn, how you work with participants, the approach you take to data generation/collection and analysis, and the way you present your findings.” (p.25) Researcher, know thyself, in other words. In essence, the text has made the case for philosophical and methodological congruity, and in Part 3, the researcher is given a guide for the developing, writing, defending, and even funding the research proposal. In many ways, Part 3 is a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section, with straightforward answers designed to assuage the fears and insecurities likely to arise at the beginning of a project. The final chapter, “A New Generation of Qualitative Research” brings the reader full circle from the early history of the opening chapters to the contemporary qualitative scene.

The major strengths of the book are the quality of the research experts who contributed to the text, as well as those scholars associated with the “window into” sections and the editors themselves. If pressed to identify a weakness of the text, I would draw attention to the almost exclusive focus on Western conceptions of philosophy and research. That said, and recognizing that the words relevant and refreshing can be over-used, in this case, both adjectives apply.

So how is this book a practical guide for beginning researchers? These readers are provided with the background necessary to understand how each methodology is situated in Western philosophical traditions and an introduction to the relevant methods of generating, collecting, and analysing data for each. As stated above, the beginning researcher also has access to a research excerpt, key points and critical questions, and the superb reference lists. The structure of the text allows the reader to compare

methodologies, taking into account the interests, proclivities, and positioning of the researcher. The book promises this, and delivers.

Not surprisingly, then, *Qualitative Methodology* can be recommended as a text book for the instructor of an introductory research course or as a support for a new graduate student not yet “on fire” about a particular approach to research. I can envision a thesis supervisor saying, “Take the text away to read this weekend, and then we’ll talk about your research journey.” If employed as a textbook for a course, an instructor could be relatively confident that students would have sufficient background to begin a research project. One might hope students would also gain a residual benefit from exposure to the kind of writing exemplified in each chapter: succinct overviews, clear statement of purpose, realized intentions, and readable prose.

This brings me to the final set of readers who might be attracted to this text, those wishing either to refresh their own understanding of methodologies that have languished since graduate school in their consciousness, or to satisfy curiosity about a field in which they are not immersed. Although what I have claimed about the accessibility of the text is true, what any writer knows is that this impression is the result of serious scholarship and deep understanding. Calling this a practical guide is also true, but is a version of truth that does not necessarily acknowledge the depth of expertise required to be this clear. The editors assembled leading researchers to write each of the speciality chapters and it shows. Consequently, this is a distinguished addition to the genre of research textbooks.

At the risk of sounding like a spokesperson from the SAGE marketing department, I recommend *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide* as an invaluable resource for students, instructors, thesis supervisors, and researchers in social sciences and applied fields such as education.

Reference

Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.