

Review:

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**Adrian Holliday (2001). Doing and Writing Qualitative Research.**

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**Abstract:** Adrian HOLLIDAY's book is composed of eight practical and easy to read chapters. The author is very aware of the varied audiences for his book: undergraduate and graduate students, novice qualitative researchers and colleagues. Although he does not specifically tackle ethical issues, the question about how it is possible to manage researcher subjectivity throughout the whole research process is answered. The focus of this book is to demonstrate that qualitative writing (showing the workings) is a major contribution to the rigor and validity of qualitative research. The author's effort is commendable, though the book has some weaknesses.

**Table of Contents**

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Going through Everyday Life to Research Settings](#)
- [3. Going through Data to Build Up Arguments](#)
- [4. Going to the Culture of Dealing](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

**1. Introduction**

As all of us know, qualitative inquiry is mainly a craft. Moreover, qualitative research is a very difficult craft to learn and to develop. In fact, the act of thinking about qualitative inquiry and its results is a craft as well. Nevertheless, we do not have many books that teach us how to analyze our "know-how". Doing and Writing Qualitative Research is written by an applied linguist who looks at the writing of qualitative research as an artifact of language in society. He has obtained a great deal of deep experience supervising qualitative research, from the undergraduate to the doctoral level. He has been working for a long time in international language education as well as sharing multi and intercultural experiences with his students and colleagues. [1]

The book is written in a user-friendly manner, providing an excellent summary at the end of each chapter. In addition, a small set of discussion questions is included to facilitate learning. Although the book is not a simple manual, its structure is very similar to a step-by-step guide. To prepare the contents, HOLLIDAY has selected a corpus of around 20 examples of papers. In my view, this is the book's first weakness: the papers include undergraduate student assignments, master's dissertations, published papers and doctoral theses. This

makes them not necessarily comparable in their conceptual, theoretical and methodological scope. From this heterogeneous corpus, HOLLIDAY analyzes different aspects involved in doing and writing qualitative research; nonetheless, his analysis is only applicable to certain sorts of written "genres", as he likes to call them (journal articles, books, university assignments, dissertation, research reports and so on). In this way, as author, he is able to tackle a very important set of sensitive issues. [2]

## 2. Going through Everyday Life to Research Settings

The writer as stranger is the main idea in the first chapter, "Approaching Qualitative Research". Beyond his particular view of two major paradigms in qualitative research that he calls *naturalism* and *progressivism*, he uses SCHÜTZ's notion (1964) of the stranger approaching a new culture to demonstrate the essence of qualitative research. Although he frequently reminds us of his particular view about these two major paradigms, this is a big issue that needs to be discussed more meticulously, but it is not the book's focus. [3]

Managing the researcher's subjectivity throughout the qualitative inquiry process is most important. HOLLIDAY proposes that the writing process (and writer) must be considered in analyzing qualitative research. He is, therefore, dealing with the basic and very important topic of *showing the workings of the research*. To HOLLIDAY is through showing the workings that the written study establishes the research process's rigor. [4]

The book's basic aim is to demonstrate how to write qualitative research and the author is willing to make the complex accessible to the novice researcher. The second chapter, "Starting Out", is specifically written to reach that objective. In this chapter, I felt the author-as-teacher struggling to clarify the differences between everyday life and research settings to everyone in his classroom; explaining the hypothesis role in instrumental research; and illustrating how to find research questions. I believe that we already have a good book for use in discussions with our students on that issue: "Read me First for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods" by Janice M. MORSE and Lyn RICHARDS (2002). The book is most helpful and accessible in teaching the process of producing data using various qualitative methods. [5]

The author's goal in chapter 3 is to provide us with an analysis of different ways to incorporate "show the workings" in the research process; for HOLLIDAY it includes: what the researcher did, what the study does, and how the whole research project achieves what it does. Comparing two different ways of thinking about qualitative writing, the cynical one ("qualitative researchers can do whatever they want", p.67) and the very well done (making "the writing of the research a central element in achieving accountability", p.47), HOLLIDAY shows us some elements that reveal the infrastructure of the research. He demonstrates this by examining several real examples from his corpus of undergraduate student assignments, master's dissertations, published papers and doctoral theses. Examples such as an ethnography about a girl's school in Cairo, a study of

women's identities and the media, a textual analysis on gender in a teenage magazine, a phenomenological study about aerobics classes, a study about British perceptions of Japanese students, and a study of the work culture in McDonald's. [6]

Using these examples, he draws a very attractive picture of how qualitative researchers construct the reality of their research through the way they show their own work. His reflections in this section on the best way to articulate our issues when we are writing qualitatively are very helpful. To explain why and how has always been problematic and, sometimes, tedious, but HOLLIDAY provides us with the concept of the conceptual framework and procedural explanation as essential elements in order to spell out our analytical scaffolding to others. An important strength of the book is its looking for the best ways to express our conceptualization and modeling processes by tables and figures. [7]

### **3. Going through Data to Build Up Arguments**

Although HOLLIDAY does not discuss the differences between qualitative research designs or strategies of inquiry, he does analyze several types of data provide by qualitative writings. In Chapter 4, "What counts as data", he again evaluates different strategies of presenting data, but using only examples from his corpus of selected assignments and papers, (and mainly from the ethnography about girl's school in Cairo). He digs to uncover the links between what the participants say and what the researcher describes or write about them. [8]

Another weakness of this book is that the author does not discuss the nature of qualitative evidence emerging from different approaches such as grounded theory, phenomenology, auto ethnography, narrative analysis and others. In fact, he sees "thick description" (GEERTZ 1973) everywhere, including in studies which do not claim any close relationship with the "thick description" pretension. He seems to be doing his own interpretation about what counts as data instead of show us his analysis about how other researchers have interpreted their data. Nonetheless, his effort is useful in describing the ways in which data will emerge during the research process. [9]

Books such as "Composing Qualitative Research" (GOLDEN-BIDDLE & LOCKE 1997) and "Writing Up Qualitative Research" (WOLCOTT 2001), which offer suggestions for handling various questions concerning the gaps between data, raw data, data analysis and writing up qualitative research, are essential for every qualitative researcher's personal library. One of the virtues of HOLLIDAY's book is that it demonstrates the complex and creative process of sense-making of chaotic qualitative data in its story writing. In my view, Chapter 5, "Writing about data", is not only well written, but also well illustrates, by tables and figures, the conceptual structure of data becoming evidence for an argument. Moving from data, raw data, data collection and analysis to the writing of the data analysis as a journal article, a research report or a book, always involves certain degrees of writer's creativity. [10]

It is important to emphasize that, by seeing qualitative research writing as an artifact of language in society, it is possible to think about the qualitative researcher as an architect of meaning. We must recognize that qualitative research's stronghold depends upon its argumentative richness as well. I firmly believe in qualitative inquiry as social construction of plausible arguments, beyond the discourse of academic writing and its conventions. [11]

HOLLIDAY provides us with very well developed and conceptualized examples of different ways to manage the transition from raw data to text. His central interest is to look at how data can be organized, analyzed and presented in a qualitative study. He presents, for instance, the thematic approach to illustrate in what manner the data can be easily presented in the data analysis section according to the previously defined structure that governed data collection. Although he presents a emergent, holistic thematic approach that allows management of the data, regardless of the devices used to collect them (whether questionnaires, interviews or observations), the themes are rearranged according to their emergence in the course of the research as well. The challenge of effecting thick description in building up the argument is also examined and its role in facilitating the uncovering of the data's components that are shown as further evidence. [12]

In addition, he presents different critical ideas about the common practice in ethnographic writing of incorporating data seamlessly within the main text. One example is the use of longer stretches of verbatim quotations from participants' accounts, with no analytical or theoretical comments from the researcher. Because further discussions about the integrity of research are implicated, it is also important to reveal different degrees of explicitness into the theoretical arguments by which the data analysis become meaningful. Although HOLLIDAY formulates no discussion about the truthfulness criteria in the ethnographical narrative, his analysis on the sequence of raw data—extracts—evidence—theoretical comment—argument is very motivating. [13]

Chapter 6, "Writer voice", is devoted to dealing with new thinking about a strong personal presence in the text. HOLLIDAY provides a rich variety of advice for the novice qualitative researcher about this issue. However, doing this, with no further reflections on theoretical or epistemological considerations about writing as a method of inquiry, is another of the book's weakness. Still, it is essential to remember that we have to thoroughly and meticulously analyze our own ideas about teaching qualitative inquiry and to include reflection into our own writing practice. Similar to Part Five of "Doing Qualitative Research" by David SILVERMAN (2000), HOLLIDAY's chapter provides the novice researcher with practical ideas necessary in developing a writer's style. [14]

#### **4. Going to the Culture of Dealing**

In my view, the two last chapters of HOLLIDAY's book contain a wealth of attractive ideas on sociological interaction between participants and researchers. It is in these two chapters that it is possible to find theoretical reflection about the qualitative research process as a creative writing process. [15]

In Chapter 7, HOLLIDAY is able to deconstruct, by a fictitious and imaginary exercise, what is likely to happen when the researcher enters a setting. He likes to call "culture of dealing" the social process taking place when two people from different backgrounds come together to do something. From his analysis of culture of dealing, he suggests to us that thinking and writing about the social relations involved in the qualitative research process can itself become a part of the main discussion of the study's data. He is also asking us to replace the notion of accountability with one of the researcher-as-writer, showing us her/his personal processes. The boundaries of any qualitative research must be considered from a situational analysis of cultural boundaries. On this issue, the book gains descriptive richness by means of the author's preoccupation with cross-cultural matters. His fictitious and imaginary exercise, about the personal and cultural interaction between an Iranian carpet dealer and a young, female, British researcher during an interview, is truly outstanding. [16]

Prevention of stereotypes, awareness of hedging and avoidance of easy answers are, among others, the basic issues of the last chapter. If qualitative researcher is looking for the meaning of social actions, HOLLIDAY believes that everyone doing qualitative research "must struggle to pursue the deeper perceptions of the people in their setting" (p.195). It is an interesting issue, because it is his intent throughout the book to show us the relevance of our writing style to qualitatively understanding our social interaction with the participants as a sort of cultural intercompetence. The complexity of any encounter in our research settings bring us the opportunity to think about the role of our own subjectivity in dealing with the worlds and sensitivities of people in their natural settings. [17]

To summarize, I now remark upon some of the weaknesses in the book; they include: 1) an inadequate sample of manuscripts to analyze the writing process; 2) scarce discussion about the qualitative evidence from different research designs, and 3) poor discussion about writing as a method of inquiry. I believe that a reflection about how we should teach and talk about writing must be continuous and permanent. Nonetheless, the strongest feature of HOLLIDAY's book is his insistent point-of-view that qualitative research is culture-learning and a creative writing process. [18]

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