

Review:

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Tom Wengraf (2001). *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narratives and Semi-structured Methods*. Sage: London, 424 pages, ISBN 0 8039 7501 5 (pbk) £ 19.99. ISBN 0 8039 7500 7 (hbk) £ 60

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Abstract: This is a book for the discerning qualitative researcher, interested in a thorough grounding in qualitative research interviewing. WENGRAF has written a superlative, well-constructed text, which qualitative researchers have been waiting for. It focuses on the minutiae of preparing for, undertaking, and analysing interviews and interview texts. Despite the minor problems concerning the possible use of CAQDAS software and the potential readability problems with the use of acronyms throughout the book, WENGRAF has produced a piece of work which will serve as a bible for everyone concerned with qualitative research interviewing.

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1. Placing the Book in the Field

Qualitative research interviews are, arguably, the mainstay of the burgeoning field of qualitative social research. Research interviewing is a major tool within the qualitative researcher's toolbox. Couple this with the increasing move within the social sciences away from the grand narratives of history and progress and towards a more individualised accounting for everyday praxis and exigencies, and one has a need, perhaps both felt and real, for a research method which enhances the place of the spoken word within social science research. So, we have seen, a rise in the nature and type of research that encompasses a focus on what "real" people "really" say; research which places the spoken word at the centre of its praxis, namely in-depth interviewing. Indeed, within this field of study and research there has also been a significant increase in the quantity, if not to say quality, of those research papers and articles concerning biographical- and narrative-based qualitative research. This is exemplified, by the "turn to biographical methods", as espoused by CHAMBERLAYNE, BORNAT and WENGRAF (2000), which itself could be described as a companion volume to this book. It is not within the scope of this review to cover the extent of this change within social science and social research, but, suffice to say that there is a significant contribution to social science generally from the field of narrative and biographical investigations into people's lives. It is timely then, that here is a book

that claims to present a full range of interviewing practices, protocols and procedures involved in the research field described above. There is clearly a need for such a body of work. [1]

Anyone coming to this book hoping to find a checklist of issues and problems to be addressed when doing qualitative research interviews, however, is likely to be disappointed. Whilst this does indeed present such things, it is much more than a checklist of *do's* and *don't's*. WENGRAF has produced a volume of material which is an in-depth look at in-depth qualitative research interviewing and analyses of interview texts. [2]

It has to be said, though, that anyone picking up this volume will need to have quite a good degree of research interview knowledge and skills prior to reading it. It is clearly not for the novice. Having said that, WENGRAF's book is a masterpiece of its genre. It focuses on the practice and analysis of in-depth qualitative research interviewing, therefore easily achieving its primary aim. In particular, the book focuses on the practice and use of biographical interpretive narrative method of interviewing and analysis, a specific approach which has evolved from Continental qualitative researchers, particularly German, and specifically following the work of Fritz SCHÜTZE and Gabrielle ROSENTHAL. [3]

2. General Content of the Book

The book is divided up into 6 main sections concerning the research process surrounding the use of the in-depth interview as a research method. It begins with an outline of the conceptual framework guiding the specific utility of the interview as method. This is in contrast to many authors who in the past have perhaps been guilty of what JANESICK (1994) has called "methodolatry", finding a method which then governs the conduct of the rest of the research, rather than presenting interviewing as within a recognisable conceptual framework. Most authors writing about interview as a research method tend to present the work in this way, either deliberately or otherwise. WENGRAF concentrates on placing the interview within firmly constructed and understood conceptual frameworks that then guide the performance of the interview itself and the subsequent analysis of its content and process. He explores a number of these conceptual frameworks, which enable a link between objectivities and subjectivities and their link to the theoretical background supporting the research question. In a sense WENGRAF quite rightly argues and illustrates how interview as a social research method should be placed within a sound methodological tradition. [4]

Following on from this, WENGRAF moves from consideration of preparation for the interview, to the interview's conduct, and then examining and exploring a variety of strategies with which to undertake the analysis of the materials which the interview process and conduct has produced. Again, WENGRAF highlights a number of approaches (linked to the theoretical background), including references to the work of those such as ROSENTHAL (1993) and BRECKNER (1998). Finally, he discusses ways in which cross-case comparisons can be made with all the potential attendant pitfalls this can present, before summing up

with strategies for presenting the work. For example, he makes particular reference here to SPRADLEY's (1979) work on levels of proposition as well as the equally well-known GLASER and STRAUSS (1992) grounded theory approach to textual analysis. [5]

3. Critique

This is, then, a work of some considerable complexity and makes a significant contribution to the understanding and practice of in-depth interviewing within social research. Whilst this book has something which will be of use to everyone wishing to enhance their understanding of the place and practice of interviewing within the context explored, it will be of particular interest to those whose research interests lie within the conceptual framework as outlined within the biographical narrative interpretive method. [6]

The text is replete with numerous examples, illustrations, vignettes and other exemplars of the method or methods under discussion. Similarly, I particularly like the inclusion of case studies that are of considerable depth in many instances. So often in other general textbooks, case studies are brief and one-dimensional—in the sense of giving a case history, for example, and leaving the analytic discussion of it within the general discourse of the text. Here, there are many instances of case study-type material being presented, which are then systematically dissected and analysed, clearly identifying the precise mode or modes of analysis. This is something to be commended. WENGRAF is open in his exposition of the methods used. Indeed, it is probably not a book that can be read from cover to cover in one sitting. The exposition and explanations which go hand in hand here suggest strongly that *Qualitative Research Interviewing* is a book as much about learning by doing than by merely reading the literature, and quite right too. [7]

Similarly, those people familiar with open learning materials will know the benefit of encouraging the reader to pause and consider what has just been discussed. This is encouraged by the use of questions and exercises that the reader can undertake to check understanding of the point or points under discussion. This also encourages the important practice within this kind of fieldwork to explore interpretations made with others, rather than plough the lonely furrow of "uni-interpretive" research. [8]

Whilst I have made a point of suggesting that this is a very worthwhile addition to the field of research interviewing, particularly for those researchers with some experience, there are a couple of points which make this book harder for those who may be just starting out on their research journey. [9]

There are numerous acronyms used throughout the text which, if the reader is not already familiar with at least some of them, make for frequent moving backwards and forwards through the book to "remember" what particular meaning is being adopted, especially when some are very closely linked e.g. BDA, BDC, BIM, BINM. In production, the acronyms are not even presented on

the same page. While WENGRAF does acknowledge this problem of the use of acronyms, I am sure readers new to the field will have some problem getting used to the terms. [10]

A second related issue, particularly for "new" researchers is the overuse, I think, of what can only be described as jargon (on which the acronyms are often based). Whilst I acknowledge WENGRAF's point that the area under discussion is an expertise based on knowledge and experience, I can not see any purpose being served by cloaking this knowledge system and expertise in a language code which makes newcomers to the field confused. By all means introduce and use terms which refer directly to what one means, but don't overdue it. [11]

On a different and probably less problematic note, it might have been useful to include a modicum of discussion on the use or potential use of CAQDAS software in the analysis of the interview texts. As it is, WENGRAF keeps it quite short and suggests in the space of one sentence that these are very useful tools which researchers should utilise. The CISAID (formerly Code-a-text) software program which I have used in my narrative research has proved invaluable. So, it would probably have been better to have some indication of the experience of using such tools in the processes outlined within this book. [12]

That is, however, rather a moot, if minor, point. WENGRAF has written a bold, incisive and erudite volume on the intricacies and complexities of qualitative research interviewing within the general field of biographical and narrative research. This book comes highly recommended for all those with even only a slight interest in the research field in question. [13]

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