

Review:

*Manish K. Thakur*

**Adrian Holliday (2007). Doing and Writing Qualitative Research**  
(Second Edition). London: Sage Publications, xiv+200 pages,  
ISBN 978 1 4129 1130 6 (paperback), \$43.95

**Key words:**

qualitative  
research;  
academic writing;  
discourse;  
language;  
scientific rigour

**Abstract:** The book fruitfully combines discussions on qualitative research methods with the craft of academic writing. While detailing different stages involved in qualitative research, it accords appreciable attention to the fundamental epistemological premises of different qualitative research genres. Yet, its central concern is to demonstrate ways and means to manage researcher's subjectivity in the writing of qualitative research. The book looks at the act of writing as crucial to the twin concerns of rigor and validity in qualitative research. It privileges writing as an important methodological resource that qualitative researchers employ to make the workings of their research procedures transparent and establish their accountability in relation to specificities of a given research setting. Given this focus, the eight chapters of the book discuss at length issues such as authorial voice, the trials and tribulations of transition from data to written study, the reflexivity of the researcher as writer, and the demanding expectations of cautious detachment in reporting the people, setting, and the worlds and sensitivities that are part of any qualitative research enterprise.

**Table of Contents**

- [1. The Problematic of Qualitative Research](#)
- [2. Overview of the Book](#)
- [3. Research, Writing and Discourse](#)
  - [3.1 Research and writing](#)
  - [3.2 Academic writing as discourse](#)
  - [3.3 Stages of research](#)
- [4. Conclusion](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

**1. The Problematic of Qualitative Research**

The increasing popularity of qualitative research has witnessed the burgeoning growth of introductory and make-it-easy books and manuals. The present book stands out in the field by not claiming to be a simple manual of how to do qualitative research. By the author's own admission, it is aimed at two types of audiences: newcomers to the field as well as established researchers. Expectedly, it provides tips on where to begin and how to proceed in one's research. At the same time, it foregrounds the problematic issues concerning the social, cultural and political complexities that qualitative research involves. Quite explicitly, HOLLIDAY views research as an ideologically situated practice. In this sense, basics of the craft and the finer distinctions in which that craft is embedded acquire equal prominence. [1]

## 2. Overview of the Book

In the very first chapter—"approaching qualitative research"—, the author posits the researcher as writer who approaches her/his own research experience in the same way as a stranger approaches a new culture. There is not only an explicit allusion to SCHÜTZ's phenomenology, but also an admission that social research is essentially ideological and ethnocentric. The surmise is that the qualitative researcher as writer should approach her/his own data and field experiences as a fresh phenomenon. According to HOLLIDAY, this scrutiny of the research experience through the conscious act of writing is the bedrock of the researcher's act of accountability within the community of qualitative researchers. In the remainder of the book, he elaborates on his fundamental assertion by highlighting instances wherein researchers have managed their subjectivity through a variety of mechanisms. Chapter 2 presents an overview of different stages involved in undertaking qualitative research. This chapter advises readers on a set of apparently sequential, but practically overlapping, steps to be taken when starting out a piece of qualitative research. These steps relate to determining the area, establishing a research question and defining the research setting. In a way, it reiterates the staple of what we generally find in any introductory text on qualitative research. Chapter 3 brings out the importance of the written study in relation to the explanations of the workings of the research. It particularly focuses on the conceptual framework and significance of a research strategy. Here, HOLLIDAY cautions us against falling into the abyss of cultural relativism. In his understanding, it is possible for the researcher to maintain rigor through careful articulation of who s/he is, what s/he has done, and how s/he has responded to the particular research setting. Seen in this way, HOLLIDAY posits writing as the basis for scientific accountability, a theme that runs throughout the book. [2]

Chapter 4 deals with the issue of data in qualitative research—where it comes from and what makes it valid. It contains a fine-grained exposition of how the researcher as writer articulates her/his data and then uses it as the basis for argument and discussion within the guiding principles of thick description. Chapters 5 to 8 are singularly devoted to different facets of writing: "Writing about data", "Writer voice", "Writing about relations", and "Making appropriate claims". The very titles of the last four chapters of the book reveal the centrality that the author bestows on writing in qualitative research enterprise and, accordingly, writing receives detailed consideration from the author. Chapter 5 mulls over ways of organising and presenting data so that its original richness is preserved. Chapter 6 looks at the role of the writer as a participant in the making of academic discourse. This chapter gives the author an opportunity to expound on his thesis that the writing of qualitative research is an artefact of language in society. The presentation of the person of the researcher as writer in Chapter 6 is balanced with an analysis in Chapters 7 and 8, of how s/he must struggle with the realities of the people s/he encounters within the boundaries of a research project. Chapter 7 critically examines the issue of reflexivity and discusses how the successful researcher sets up a productive dialogue between herself/himself the people who have been the source of her/his data. It is full of examples of qualitative research writing. The last chapter presents samples of what the author

calls "culturist" writing and advises his readers to avoid this genre of writing by adhering to principles of cautious detachment (from the research setting) and suspending immediate judgement on preliminary data. The purpose of this chapter is to show how to be faithful to the realities of research setting and steer clear of possible distortions by not making exaggerated claims and reductive cultural overgeneralisations. For HOLLIDAY, making appropriate claims in relation to one's data is not simply a matter of technical accuracy. Instead, it involves promoting understanding of the humanity of the people whom we research so as not to reduce and package them in terms of cultural stereotypes and reified categories. [3]

### **3. Research, Writing and Discourse**

#### **3.1 Research and writing**

It is commonplace that the principles of doing qualitative research are realised, to a large extent, in the structural conventions and language of the written study. To capture the shifting realities of social life into a finished written product with claims to scientific rigour has been the pre-eminent aspiration of a qualitative researcher. This realisation is evident in the very title of the book wherein "doing" qualitative research coexists with "writing" it. In a way, the book looks closely at how qualitative research is written. It offers technical guidance on the planning and organisation of the text which ultimately emerges out of any research enterprise. [4]

Expectedly, the book turns out to be an exploration of how to write as simply and transparently as is possible within the ideological minefield of qualitative research. Indeed, as HOLLIDAY makes it clear in the first chapter itself, this exploration is as much about academic writing as about the conventions of social research. This makes sense, given his understanding that the very act of interpretation within qualitative research is itself integrated with the act of writing. For him, it is this integration which imparts meanings to the image of the qualitative researcher as *bricoleur*. [5]

Moving from the field to the text to the reader is central to the whole qualitative research process in which interpretation requires the telling of a story or a narrative that states the sequences of happenings. Put differently, writing of the research is a product of a discourse community which calls for paying attention to one's own textual practices. It also calls for awareness about the implication of texts in the work of reality construction. Not surprisingly, HOLLIDAY privileges ongoing dialogue between researcher and writing and illustrates his arguments with excerpts from assignments, dissertations, published papers and doctoral theses. [6]

#### **3.2 Academic writing as discourse**

In essence, the problems of writing are not different from the problems of method. As a consequence, a qualitative researcher confronts fieldwork with the attendant challenges around the problematic of representation. Issues such as

validity, reliability and objectivity are never settled for her/him. Every time s/he undertakes a fresh research, s/he has to display sensitivity to the relationship between the researcher and the people in the research setting. S/he has to negotiate her/his way through the reigning paradigms of naturalism and cultural relativism. To the extent that writing acts as the basis of scientific accountability, s/he has to show the workings of her/his research. This boils down to the question of how the researcher as writer articulates her/his data and then uses it as the basis for argument and discussions within the guiding principle of thick description. [7]

Sure enough, academic writing constitutes a discourse that is culturally and ideologically located. HOLLIDAY is emphatic in maintaining that the positioning of the writer in this discourse needs to be articulated in any good piece of research-based text. He is equally aware that it is impossible to suggest how to write good qualitative research. Yet, he stresses the point that the role of a researcher needs to be examined reflexively. In his reading, a researcher acts and conducts her/himself within a cultural space that belongs to people who are not researchers. Further, it is this humility as a researcher that can help one in being a transparent writer as well. [8]

Undeniably, managing subjectivity in such a way that scientific rigour is preserved is the daunting task before a researcher. To account for this management in the written study without creating an illusion of objectivity entails the negotiation of complex procedures on her/his part. HOLLIDAY seems to suggest a way out of this dilemma which confronts every qualitative researcher. He insists that rigour in qualitative research lies in the principled development of strategy to suit the scenario being studied. Besides, in this type of research, decisions about research instruments are gradual responses to the nature of social setting being investigated. Quite unlike quantitative research, where the source of validity is known, qualitative research has to show its workings every single time it unfolds itself. Only by being as transparent as possible about how the research is constructed in relation to the research setting, can the researcher enable the evaluation of its cultural and ideological appropriateness. [9]

### **3.3 Stages of research**

To deal with the messy reality of the scenario being studied means engaging in dialogue with different social worlds. It also demands proper documentation of the detailed procedures as they happened while carrying out a piece of research; that is, where various stages involved in the undertaking of research need to be thought through logically and systematically. It is part of the received wisdom that three stages of a research process go into the making of any viable research enterprise: area/topic (what is going to be studied), research question (what one wants to find out), and research setting (the location and boundaries within which the research will take place). In Chapter 2, HOLLIDAY demonstrates these stages by drawing upon his own writings and also on some of his students' research. [10]

Interestingly, being an exploration of the quality of social life, qualitative research does not conjure up the same type of precision as required by quantitative research. It works by way of expanding variables rather than controlling them. Nonetheless, it does follow the loose format expected of an academic piece of research. Generally speaking, as HOLLIDAY also maintains, it consists of a literature review outlining an assessment of the current thought in the field, the state-of-the-art. Typically, literature reviews allow researchers to establish their position in the form of a conceptual framework. Research methodology can be woven into a literature review as well if the strategies of research demand so. Or, one can proceed straightaway to thick description, detailing different and complex facets of particular phenomena. The point is that qualitative research offers a sort of methodological flexibility that is not possible within quantitative research. Nonetheless, flexibility does not mean anything goes. In the end, the researcher needs to make sense of the data and also provide a structure for the presentation of arguments in her/his written work. [11]

Qualitative researchers generally accomplish this task by way of formation of themes. Themes emerge as the outcome of the continuous dialogue between data and the researcher. The sequencing of arguments and accompanying commentary and discussion are guided by the researcher's act of appropriation of the data that s/he considers to be important. In the process of data selection, it is likely that s/he emphasises key data sets rich in the sense of containing as many of the key elements as possible within a short space. This translation of rich data into an accessible and lucid text and the associated and practical problems of writing are what animate *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. [12]

#### **4. Conclusion**

True, many of the points covered in the book are part of the received wisdom by now, but reiteration helps in making certain insights part of the methodological commonsense of qualitative research. For instance, we need to remind ourselves that all scenarios, even the most familiar ones, should be seen as strange with layers of mystery. These mysterious layers are always beyond the control of the researcher and always need to be discovered. Qualitative research does not see these as constraints. Moreover, qualitative research addresses such areas in social life which defy quantitative research. More importantly, qualitative research does not pretend to reduce the effect of uncontrollable social variables. Quintessentially, it leads to open-ended studies generally leading the research into unforeseen areas of discovery within people's lives. Simply speaking, it is a different paradigm of research, privileging interpretation and understanding over precision and prediction. We need to appreciate that qualitative research is also modest in claiming that research can explore, catch glimpses, illuminate and then try to interpret bits of reality. It does not allow the lesser burden of proof on evidence (as understood by statistics and experiments) to compromise its rigour. Frequently enough, qualitative research yields approximations—basic attempts to represent what is, in fact, a much more complex reality. As HOLLIDAY puts it beautifully, qualitative research is like "[the] paintings that represent our own impressions, rather than photographs of what is really there" (p.7). [13]

Overall, the book is a useful resource for both students and teachers of qualitative research. It is well-conceived, well-written and an honest book. In particular, the author deserves appreciation for his open acknowledgement, "I make no attempt to address qualitative research beyond the domain of an English-speaking world" (p.xiii). [14]

## Author

*Manish K. THAKUR* is a sociologist based at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. His areas of research interests lay in the broad fields of rural-agrarian sociology, political sociology and development studies. Presently, he is working on a research project that seeks to look into everyday politics of representation in a migrant community. In addition, he is engaged in understanding issues of social exclusion in the context of rural development in India.

Contact:

Manish K. Thakur

Public Policy and Management Group  
Indian Institute of Management Calcutta  
Kolkata – 700 104, India

E-mail: [mt@iimcal.ac.in](mailto:mt@iimcal.ac.in)

## Citation

Thakur, Manish K. (2008). Review: Adrian Holliday (2007). *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* [14 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 10(1), Art. 9, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs090198>.