

Review:

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**Linda Dale Bloomberg & Marie F. Volpe (2008). *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Roadmap From Beginning to End*.** Los Angeles, London: Sage Publications, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-4129-5650-5 (cloth) \$79.95 (US), ISBN 978-1-4129-5651-2 (paperback) \$34.95 (US)

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**Abstract:** In writing an overarching book aimed at addressing the needs of all qualitative doctoral researchers, BLOOMBERG and VOLPE have produced a volume that offers many tools and ideas that are of value to doctoral dissertation students. However, the publication is not without its limitations: it is underpinned by an unarticulated, positivist approach to qualitative research, and presumes readers will at least be familiar with the system of doctoral dissertations undertaken in the United States of America.

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## **1. Introduction**

As three current PhD students seeking to complete qualitative dissertations in Australia, the opportunity to review BLOOMBERG and VOLPE's book was one deemed eminently suitable to the peer support process that we have developed. All three of us are, or have undertaken, qualitative research projects, although using different methodological frameworks. Janette has used Critical Ethnography to underpin a historically informed sociological exploration of Australian migration; Richard is researching the provision of recreation services for people with disabilities by Australian local governments using Grounded Theory, and Shaun (who is from Boston, USA) is using phenomenology to explore the body images and identities of gay elite athletes in an international study. [1]

Despite our diverse identifications within the qualitative research field, as a review team a shared perception of this book's strengths and limitations emerged. With the growth of qualitative research as a field over the last few decades, and the mushrooming of books outlining how to undertake various modes and aspects of such research, it is good to see a book specifically focusing on qualitative

research by doctoral students has been published. While many qualitative methods publications provide an understanding of the variety and complexity of conducting this form of research, BLOOMBERG and VOLPE have undertaken publishing a book aimed at addressing the needs of all qualitative doctoral researchers. There are strong offerings made in this book that could be picked up by many students, and the tables and checklists developed may be particularly useful. However, the publication is not without its limitations, in particular being underpinned by an unarticulated, positivist, or pragmatic (BREUER & SCHREIER, 2007) approach to qualitative research, and the presumption that readers will at least be familiar with the system of doctoral dissertations undertaken in the United States of America. [2]

## 2. Locating This Publication

BLOOMBERG and VOLPE's book is most closely aligned with the literature that exists seeking to outline how to both undertake, and write up doctoral research (for example DAVIS & PARKER, 1997; GLATTHORN & JOYNER, 2005). These books can be seen to be attempting to bridge three main areas targeted by doctoral students when seeking models of how to undertake a doctoral dissertation. These three areas include the numerous journal articles addressing specific aspects of PhD study, such as what examiners are looking for (MULLINS & KILEY, 2002), and how to construct literature reviews (BOOTE & BEILE, 2005). A second group of texts, well documented by BLOOMBERG and VOLPE, outlines how to undertake specific qualitative research methodologies, such as grounded theory (CHARMAZ, 2005; GLASER, 1998; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998) or critical ethnography (CARSPACKEN, 1996). A third group involves the books which aim at the PhD student as a person, and offer guidance on how to manage the more personal aspects of being a PhD student, such as managing your supervisor, time management, and motivation techniques. KEARNS and his colleagues have offered two examples familiar to the reviewers of this kind of literature, *The seven secrets of highly successful PhD students* (KEARNS & GARDINER, 2006) and *The PhD experience: what they didn't tell you at induction* (KEARNS, GARDINER, MARSHALL, & BANYTIS, 2006). In addition, BLOOMBERG and VOLPE can be seen to be contributing to the emerging discussion on teaching and learning qualitative research methods and methodology, as discussed in FQS since 2007 in a [debate](#). So whilst BLOOMBERG and VOLPE are not alone in their endeavour to encompass the huge scope of a dissertation undertaking, this is a broad, wide-ranging field. [3]

In noting the links that can be made between BLOOMBERG and VOLPE and the teaching and learning discussion that is emerging regarding qualitative research methods, BREUER and SCHREIER's (2007) introductory typology of "paradigmatic" and "pragmatic" approaches to qualitative research is pertinent to this review. As a trio of peers and reviewers, our approach to qualitative research can be located within the constructivist paradigmatic approach, whereby our understanding of how subject matter is conceptualised occurs via our methodological frameworks, and guides research actions. This stands in contrast to the approach presented in this book, which can be located at the pragmatic

pole of qualitative research. At this pole qualitative research is understood as method and application, without an over-riding connection to "epistemological and other constitutive assumptions" (BREUER & SCHREIER, 2007, para. 6). There is a polarisation in which HAMMERSLEY (2004) defines qualitative research as craftwork versus procedure. BLOOMBERG and VOLPE can be clearly located in this procedural/pragmatic end of qualitative research. The epistemological ramifications of this decision must be appreciated by the doctoral candidate who opts to use this text in modelling a PhD dissertation. However, as beginning doctoral students are often novices with regard to the area of research epistemology, the text may be seen as prematurely making the decision for the candidate, without providing the proper framework by which an emerging doctoral candidate can select their own position in the pragmatist/paradigmatic binary. [4]

### 3. Overview of the Book

As the title of the book indicates the text is structured like a "road map". The beginning section (Part 1) covers processes such as "Identifying and developing a researchable topic", "Finding the right advisor", and "Establishing a timeline". The middle section (Part 2) is the most substantial section of the book with six chapters guiding the reader through the processes of undertaking and writing up a doctoral research project. The final section, Part 3 covers finishing details to a dissertation, including "Crafting a title", "Writing the Abstract", "Assembling the manuscript", "Proof-reading and editing", and two sections covering pre- and post-defence preparations. Each of the sections, and the chapters within them, are structured with an overview and outline of objectives at the beginning and conclude with a summary of the chapter/section, and, in the case of the chapters, a checklist and bibliography to the chapter. Throughout the book the authors refer to their own qualitative research on "why some people who enter doctoral programs complete all their course work, but do not go on to complete their dissertations" (BLOOMBERG & VOLPE, p.39) to illustrate the process they are presenting. [5]

Part 2 is the heart of the book and is structured around a basic six-chapter approach to writing a dissertation, summarised neatly on page 31 in Table 1.1. In this format Chapter 1 is the introduction to the research problem; Chapter 2 the literature review; three, research methodology; four, findings, five, analysis and interpretation; six, conclusion and recommendations. The little dialogue box at the bottom linking chapters four (findings) to six (conclusions and recommendations) provides a useful prompt: "If I find this [Chapter 4] ... then I think this means [Chapter 5]...therefore I conclude, or what I now know to be true is ... thus I recommend that [Chapter 6] ...". Very simply and neatly, students are led through the thinking process of connecting findings to conclusions and recommendations. [6]

In keeping with their modelling approach to dissertation production, the first chapter of Part 2 of the book is about writing an introduction to a dissertation, and ensuring that the problem, purpose for the research, research questions and approach, rationale, and anticipated outcomes are canvassed and discussed. [7]

Chapter two outlines the key points required in a "Literature review", offering guidance on how to actually undertake this task, again nicely summarised in a table (Table 2.1, p.51). This takes the reader through how to find and access literature, how to analyse what is found, synthesising and integrating the literature, and developing a conceptual framework. This concept of a conceptual framework is a notion which sees the author's position as integral to the ongoing undertaking and writing of a piece of research. In this chapter BLOOMBERG and VOLPE introduce their approach to qualitative research as a process of categorising. Readers are advised to begin developing categories "based on and directly tied to your study's research questions" (p.58). While this may be sound advice for some qualitative methodologies, it is counter to various qualitative research methodologies that are more attuned to inductive development of theorising throughout the research process, for example grounded theory (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998) and phenomenology (AHMED, 2006). From this point in the book, having listed and briefly overviewed a range of methodologies (pp.7-12), including ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology (the methodologies of the reviewers), the approach taken becomes one of "method application", with very little awareness of epistemological variations and implications. In taking this approach the book starts to come into conflict with some qualitative methodologies. [8]

In regard to the broader emerging debate regarding qualitative research as craft or procedure (HAMMERSLEY, 2004), conceptually anchored or pragmatically undertaken (BREUER & SCHREIER, 2007), it is from this very early stage of the book that the practical differences between these poles begins to emerge. While there are useful tools, concepts and ideas presented further on in the book, the lack of overt discussion of this location on the spectrum of qualitative research practices is a key reason for our recommendation that this not be a book to which new PhD students be referred without support from their supervisors/advisors. [9]

Chapter three focuses on how to present the methodology and research approach used. While this chapter offers a good description of how to present one's methods, it does not deal with presenting one's methodological framework. This fits with a pragmatic approach but is in sharp contrast to the paradigmatic understanding of the reviewers. As reviewers we believe that this is important as the plethora of qualitative methodologies, and the diversity of philosophical underpinnings that many of these claim, are seen as core to undertaking one's version of qualitative research in our experiences as doctoral students. As students undertaking this paradigmatic approach we can attest to the manner in which this aspect of both research and writing can be one of the more difficult aspects of doctoral research to initially grasp. The conceptual, methodological foundation to one's research is considered integral to doctoral study in Australian assessments. This is captured by the question we all fear, "so what is your theoretical framework?" [10]

Chapters four and five of Part 2 focus on analysing data, reporting and interpreting findings, and Chapter 6 focuses on drawing conclusions and presenting recommendations. Each chapter contains tables and charts that

summarise aspects of the chapter discussion (useful for students with visual/diagrammatic minds), finishing with a chapter checklist for ticking off the steps or directions discussed in the chapter. For example, the checklist to Chapter 2 (p.63) is separated into three sections, "preparing for the literature review", "writing the literature review", and "developing the conceptual framework". It then systematically offers questions in each section, "Are you clear about the role and scope of the literature review vis-à-vis the qualitative research tradition you have adopted?" through to "Have you made sure all information is securely saved by way of backup systems?" for the first section. [11]

Again, throughout these chapters there are some very useful summary tables, which could be used by doctoral students even if their theoretical framework is in conflict with the approach to qualitative research presented in the book. For example, Table III.1 (p.167) was useful for one of the reviewers who was completing her dissertation whilst reviewing the book as it offered points for consideration even though her research path had been quite different to that presented in the book (undertaking several sub-projects within the overarching focus of the PhD using multiple data sources including historical census data, genealogy, archival material, and interviews). This table (titled "Alignment Flowchart") takes the student through the structure of a dissertation, as identified by the authors, prompting a range of considerations. This includes thinking about whether each text reviewed is tied to the research problem defined in introducing the research, and conversely ensuring that such literature can be directly linked to the dissertation's findings and interpretations. Readers are also reminded, in this table, to eliminate unnecessary material throughout their document. Tables 6.1 (p.156) and 6.2 (p.157) were also useful, helping to conceptually connect findings through to interpretations, to conclusions, and to recommendations (6.1), and providing a table format (6.2) for listing findings/interpretations/conclusions in a manner designed to ensure consistency across the body of a dissertation. However, in presuming that a dissertation will conclude with recommendations (a practise not common in Australian dissertations) the tensions between the contents of some tables and the realities faced by us as Australian students again emerged. [12]

Figure 5.1 (p.130) offers a good example of the manner in which students seeking to use a paradigmatic rather than pragmatic approach to qualitative research could be confused or tripped up. This figure is built around the notion of developing analytic categories prior to analysis. This approach is particularly contradictory to grounded theory, where categories and theoretical development are seen as emerging from the research process and practitioners are warned against prior categorisation (GLASER, 1998; CHARMAZ, 2005). This was particularly pertinent to Richard, whose dissertation was imbedded within a Grounded Theory study, and could easily confuse or misdirect newer students. [13]

The book ends with a vast number of Appendices, A to BB, many being samples of tools that students could make use of, such as a sample "Participant demographic matrix" (Appendix D), "Interview schedule" (Appendix H), and a "Coded interview transcript excerpt" (Appendix P). [14]

The use of the authors' own qualitative research project, the development of which is used as an example throughout the book, does provide a useful tool through which the authors expand upon the ideas and suggestions they have provided in each section. In fact, the actual example of trying to understand why some research scholars never complete a dissertation itself is cleverly devised to provide the postgraduate research reader with a topic that is close to them. This in some ways enables the reader to feel the book is "speaking to them". It is important to note, in the context of this review and its critiques of the book, that BLOOMBERG and VOLPE use a case-study methodology rather than a strongly philosophically embedded methodological framework for their own research example. [15]

#### **4. Evaluative Commentary**

This book is well structured and organised, and offers some good broad suggestions and checklists, such as a supervisor checklist, and tables to assist students to map arguments and ideas across the breadth of their thesis. The authors provide useful tips throughout the book, such as what to seek from an advisor ("supervisor" in Australian parlance) including suggesting that these people should be process rather than content experts in regard to your topic, should be someone you think you will feel comfortable with, as well as someone who seems interested in you succeeding (p.17). They also note the various roles supervisors can have across a postgraduate scholar's tenure, "mentor, principle guide, and primary resource" (p.17). Other tips and ideas concerning the preparation of choosing a research topic through to developing a writing regime are all useful to assist PhD students throughout the research journey. [16]

The authors reiterate several times throughout the book the need to be flexible when conducting a qualitative study and also that qualitative research is iterative and needs to be viewed as non-linear, particularly noting this in the analysis, discussion, and conclusion stages. However, we believe that this could have been strengthened, acknowledging that the process of producing a book is linear, a reality that always makes presenting non-linear concepts difficult (SANDELOWSKI & BARROSO, 2003). [17]

There are however, two core areas of caution in regard to this publication that need to be recognised. These are the presumption of the system within which students are completing their PhD, and secondly the un-stated conceptual framework which underpins the approach to qualitative research throughout the book. [18]

As three completing PhD students in Australia the most prominent point to emerge was that the book is very US-centric and assumes that readers are familiar with, and undertaking, doctoral studies within the US system. Janette and Richard were grateful for Shaun's elucidation of the differences between the systems but in the book there was no recognition that the system used in the US is not a universal approach. A brief summary of the US system and a glossary of terminology and titles being used in the book would have been useful in this

regard and would also respond to the fact that terminology can vary not only across international borders, but also within countries (assuming that the Australian tendency is not unique in this regard). [19]

Two key differences that relate to the assumptions of this book exist between the American and Australian doctoral systems. Firstly, Australia doctoral studies are not preceded by a course work program: entry is often via Honours research, or through a range of alternate pathways such as post-graduate coursework or research programs (with two of your reviewers being examples of such alternate entries). Most apparent in this regard is the final section of the book, which assumes that the thesis/dissertation will be put to a panel to defend. While this may be the case in the United States and various European countries that we are aware of, it is not the case in Australia. Most Australian universities require PhD candidates to publically justify their research proposal within the first (full-time equivalent) year of their PhD undertaking, and their resulting thesis is then submitted for examination by 2-3 external academics at the end of their candidature. [20]

Additionally, an emerging model of PhD thesis is the "thesis by publication", by which the candidate submits a portfolio of related publications, and a statement arguing how the articles are conceptually inter-related. Shaun has chosen this style of presentation for his thesis about gay athletes. BLOOMBERG and VOLPE's text is of limited use to doctoral candidates who have chosen this publication route. While the early chapters in the text are of some relevance, the later sections are of limited use, given the structural and intellectual difference between the extended arguments of the thesis, versus the "independent yet conceptually linked" style of the chapters/articles of the thesis by publication. Candidates opting for the later method are cautioned as to the limited applicability of BLOOMBERG and VOLPE's volume. [21]

The second concern with the book is less overt but, we believe, more problematic. This is the positivistic framework underlying the notion and approach taken to qualitative research by the authors. It is possible to conceive of this positivism as being grounded in the difficulties inherent in presenting iterative and non-linear notions in a written form, as discussed by SANDELOWSKI and BARROSO (2003), or alternately as emerging from the polar positions of pragmatic rather than paradigmatically grounded qualitative research (BREUER & SCHREIER, 2007). In this book, the tendency for pragmatic approaches to qualitative research to lose their conceptual heart and fall into positivist understandings of research is revealed. It is revealed in the manner in which the authors deal with thematic analysis, suggesting the development of categories prior to data collection, and a rigid and almost prescriptive approach to thematic analysis. This left the reviewers feeling this book let them down by not trying to advocate a more inductive, creative viewpoint through which to construct and conduct a qualitative research project. This approach leaves little room for what many qualitative theorists have identified as the heart of qualitative research, the opportunity to tap into unknown and unexpected data (SANDELOWSKI & BARROSO, 2003). This is no doubt one of the most difficult aspects of

attempting to teach people how to "do" qualitative research: managing to balance validity and credibility of data management with creativity and flexibility. However, in taking a pragmatic approach to teaching qualitative research as method application, rather than a methodological application utilising a range of tools, we are of the opinion that the authors have lost the heart of qualitative research. It is the reason why we would suggest that without amendments this is a book that beginning doctoral students could become confused by on their own, and would suggest that it is a book that best merits use by supervisors and students within a supervisory framework. [22]

## 5. Conclusion

Our initial supposition as a team of reviewers was that we would each perceive the book differently, due to our own diverse theoretical and practical research foci. This did not prove to be the case. The suggestion that arises from this shared perception of the book is that one of the core dilemmas of the qualitative research field, the diversity across approaches, distinguished by a range of distinctly differing philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, may be difficult to resolve in any one-size-fits-all approach to qualitative research as attempted in this book. In coming to this conclusion, we recognise that our location at the "paradigmatic" pole of qualitative research may well be identified as a limitation on our review of BLOOMBERG and VOLPE. Nonetheless, we would suggest that, as the field of qualitative research becomes more sophisticated in its own self-analysis, there will be more overt engagement with the distinctions between pragmatic/paradigmatic qualitative research and researchers. In this hypothetical future scenario BLOOMBERG and VOLPE's book may well be identified as well suited to pragmatic qualitative researchers and dissertation writers, whilst being a far less suitable book for paradigmatic researchers for whom the theoretical frameworks of methodologies are the guiding force. [23]

In summary, we would recommend this book to potential doctoral supervisors (who could, for example, encourage potential students to utilise the checklists of supervisors), supervisors in conjunction with new students, and advanced doctoral students. We would be more cautious in recommending it to beginning or potential doctoral research students for the reasons outlined, but it has some tools and ideas that will be of great benefit to the thinking processes of many students, no doubt assisting them to complete their dissertations. [24]

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