

Perspective and Balance: Considering Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology

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Review Essay:

Mary Kopala & Lisa A. Suzuki (Eds.) (1999). Using Qualitative Methods in Psychology. London: Sage, 237 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0-7619-1036-0) £ 30.02 US\$ 54.95, Paper (ISBN 0-7619-1037-9) £19.85 US\$ 27.95

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Abstract: Mary KOPALA and Lisa A. SUZUKI's edited volume, *Using qualitative methods in psychology*, offers a great deal in its 237 pages and is a must read for anyone interested in more fully understanding the conversation on this topic. The authors of the book's seventeen chapters address such questions as: why has psychology placed primacy on quantitative methods; how reliable are the results of qualitative research; how can quantitative and qualitative approaches be combined; what ethics guide this approach; and what is needed to get qualitative articles published in reputable journals? Nearly half of the chapters provide excellent examples of qualitative research investigations in psychology. Although the book has some limitations, KOPALA and SUZUKI's book fills a gap in psychological literature regarding the use of qualitative research methods in psychology.

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1. Introduction

"... science ... is not a subject—but a moral imperative drawn from a larger narrative whose purpose is to give perspective, balance, and humility to learning" (Postman 1995, p.68)

Many textbooks on psychological research methods contain only one chapter on qualitative research. Such limited exposure is hardly enough to prepare novice researchers for qualitative inquiries. This is one of the best reasons why we need KOPALA and SUZUKI's book: even current textbooks are simply not comprehensive. KOPALA and SUZUKI explain how their book fills this gap by providing a more comprehensive overview of qualitative research methods in psychology:

"The chapters in this text address the current state of the use of qualitative methods in the field of psychology. In the first section of this book, the authors discussed foundational topics relevant to the use of qualitative methods. In the second section, the authors discussed their struggles and triumphs as they sought to gain understanding of the meaning of the participants' experiences through application of qualitative methods. The complexities of the qualitative process are clearly illustrated through the challenges the authors identified" (p.225). [1]

Besides a solid explanation of the complexities of qualitative research, this book has other merits. It also offers a thoughtful reflection on the re-emergence of the use of qualitative research methods among psychological researchers. [2]

2. Overview of the Book

KOPALA and SUZUKI's book is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the two fundamental aspects of qualitative research: 1) a historical and philosophical context, and 2) important practical considerations such as threats to reliability and validity, research identity, ethics, Internet use, teaching qualitative research in psychology, and how to write qualitative reports for publication. The second section considers the application of qualitative research in psychology within four contexts: cultural, therapeutic, action research methods, and program evaluation. Each chapter in section two summarizes investigations with qualitative designs that explore such topics as diversity, body image of lesbian women, friendships among urban adolescent boys, family therapy, clinical supervision, and relationship-based change. [3]

3. Highlights

Using qualitative methods in psychology offers a great deal in its 237 pages but the first nine chapters are the richest and contain what newcomers to qualitative research need, the fundamentals. In these nine chapters the authors address such questions as: why has psychology placed primacy on quantitative methods; how reliable are the results of qualitative research; how can quantitative and qualitative approaches be combined; what ethics guide this approach; and what is needed to get qualitative articles published in reputable journals? [4]

I direct the reader's attention to Chapter 1, the meatiest of chapters, where David L. RENNIE gives a remarkably convincing argument that qualitative research is not and needs not be only hypothetical. RENNIE's Chapter title, "Qualitative Research: A matter of hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge," however, is somewhat misleading. This chapter is better described as a rationale for why qualitative researchers should consider aligning their work more closely with notions of objectivism. RENNIE offers a coherent explanation of how psychology became so entrenched in positivism and how qualitative research counterbalances that entrenchment. Interestingly, RENNIE's roots are in quantitative inquiry. His biography reads:

"After a period of quasi-experimental research on counselor training, in recent years ... [RENNIE] has applied the grounded theory method to the study of client's reported experience of psychotherapy. This transition has stimulated an interest in the philosophy of human science" (KOPALA & SUZUKI 1999, p.236) [5]

RENNIE's chapter is well worth reading. He reminds us that all inquiry is interpretive but inquiry related to people is doubly complicated by the interaction of interpretations that both the researcher and the individual(s) being studied are making about each other. To address this complication RENNIE asks that we consider the advantages of methodological pluralism (p.4). He is calling for a conversation among psychologists to entertain the idea that relativism and objectivism need to be reconciled among qualitative researchers. RENNIE's discussion on the state-of-acceptance of qualitative research in psychology is among the most convincing that this reviewer has seen. RENNIE's compelling argument on behalf of qualitative research emerges from his philosophical interpretation of grounded theory. [6]

He is quick to point out that he is uncertain if approaches besides grounded theory would share his rationale explaining:

"I developed the foregoing understanding of the rationale for qualitative research through the avenue of working with grounded theory. I am convinced that it explains well the practice of this particular genre (Rennie, 1998b). The extent to which it applies to other approaches [of] qualitative research and, indeed, whether all qualitative researchers would even be willing to unite under a common rationale, are open questions. Several considerations are involved: (a) whether all qualitative researchers would agree that, at bottom, qualitative research is hermeneutical; (b)

whether it involves a symbiosis of abduction and induction; and (c) whether claims to understanding are made rhetorically in the ways described" (p.11). [7]

Researchers interested in an overview of qualitative research and its associated topics should buy and read this entire book. Readers with limited time should focus on the book's first section as its nine chapters provide an incredibly valuable reference on the fundamental underpinnings of qualitative research. Readers with even more limited time should be sure to read RENNIE's chapter. So many debates exist about the value of qualitative research in psychology. In fact, even qualitative researchers do not agree on a multitude of ideas. RENNIE walks us through some of the issues related to these debates. His chapter's focus ranges from a discussion of the "twin perils" (p.4) of objectivism and relativism, to the history of hermeneutics, and then to contemporary phenomenology. RENNIE's ideas will stick to your bones. His chapter is one of the highlights of this book. [8]

4. Evaluative Commentary

No one book can do justice to the promise of this book's title *Using qualitative methods in psychology*. KOPALA and SUZUKI have edited a respectable volume and they should be commended on their accomplishment of this book's publication. The strengths and limitations of this volume are described below in terms of its value in providing a historical context, its ambitious goals, and the exclusion of the contributions of some other qualitative researchers. [9]

4.1 Joining the conversation

Psychology desperately needs KOPALA and SUZUKI's edited volume, *Using qualitative methods in psychology*. In fact, this reviewer believes that when the history of qualitative research in psychology is written, many years from now, this book will be among those cited that advanced psychology by helping to usher in a more balanced 21st century perspective on psychological research. [10]

The publication of this book marks an arguably important trend in psychological research—a return to its roots, qualitative inquiry. The fact alone that Sage, one of the most prominent publishers in the international arena of social science publications, supported this work is proof that heads are turning in the direction of qualitative methodology in psychology. For years, psychologists interested in questions about the human experience that are best answered by qualitative methods have turned to texts in other disciplines for theories and design models to modify for their own purposes. Anthropology, education, and nursing texts describing qualitative research methodologies, for example, have supplemented the dearth of works on the same topic in psychology. Finally, psychologists have a book of our their that offers a coherent perspective on the historical context of this method as well as some detailed descriptions of rigorously designed qualitative investigations. [11]

That said, certainly some publications within the field of educational psychology have paved the way for KOPALA and SUZUKI's edited volume. The ideas of several prominent educational theorists and researchers have dominated (and impressively so) the historical landscape of qualitative methodology for some time (e.g., GLASER & STRAUSS 1967, PALMER 1969, HABERMAS 1971, MILES & HUBERMAN 1984, PACKER 1985, WILKINSON 1988, LINCOLN & GUBA 1989, MISCHLER 1990, PATTON 1990, WOLCOTT 1990, BOGDAN & BILKEN 1992). During the past 35 years these thinkers, and others, have provided just the right mix of credibility, scholarship, and rigor such that their arguments on the value of qualitative data collection and analysis methodology cannot be ignored. Today, although we have not arrived at a full acceptance of this approach among psychological researchers, the conversation is expanding. [12]

4.2 Extending the conversation

KOPALA and SUZUKI's book extends this conversation in several ways. These editors organized their seventeen chapters, written by twenty-five authors (including themselves), into two sections. Section I, consisting of nine chapters in two parts, "provides discussions of issues that emanate from the philosophy of science and provides a foundation for the use of qualitative methods in psychology" (KOPALA & SUZUKI 1999, p.xii). In Part I of Section I the focus is entirely on fundamentals. A brief review of each of these nine chapters will orient the reader to the scope of Part I. RENNIE's Chapter 1, "Qualitative Research: A matter of hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge" is a chapter with a tall order. The Highlights portion of this review provides a more detailed summary of RENNIE's work. This chapter's most interesting ideas are the author questions about and reasoning for making qualitative research methods more objective. These ideas are after all certainly among the most controversial philosophical debates in this field. [13]

In the first few pages of Lisa Tsoi HOSHMAND's Chapter 2, "Locating the qualitative research genre," is a philosophical discussion of how knowledge is attained. Throughout the chapter HOSHMAND asserts that "research is not disembodied technology or merely a craft" (p.21). Essentially she is arguing that research is unavoidably autobiographical. HOSHMAND's contention is that both quantitative and qualitative designs involve questions and findings that reflect the values and personal motivations of the researcher. Among the many points that HOSHMAND makes, one of her most interesting is that qualitative research will gain credibility when data collection and data analysis practices are systematic, detailed, and reported as such. She suggests too that qualitative researchers talk to one another so that they can advance the practice of qualitative research and further its credibility:

"If qualitative researchers are to become a community, more needs to be done to facilitate our internal discourse. Conversations about criteria and norms for evaluating our own research praxis can be informed by the knowledge of experience in conducting qualitative research" (p.22). [14]

Her point is well taken. There very well may be power in assembly. This chapter is worth reading. [15]

In Chapter 3, "An exploration of quality in qualitative research: Are 'reliability' and 'validity' relevant?" Elizabeth MERRICK, a seasoned qualitative researcher, reflects on the sticky terrain where debates rage about the certainty of qualitative research results. She points out that discussions gleaned from quantitative research findings typically exclude any mention of the researcher's subjective experience (p.32). Her most pervasive argument in this chapter is that qualitative research findings that include the researcher's perspectives add meaning to the story. [16]

Daniel SCIARRA's Chapter 4, "The role of qualitative researcher," and Joseph P. PONTEROTTO and Ingrid GRIEGER's Chapter 5, "Merging qualitative and quantitative perspectives in a research identity," compliment each other. SCIARRA discusses the notion that quantitative research is a search for truth and qualitative research is a search for meaning. In the same vein, SCIARRA goes to great lengths to explain that "the choice between quantitative and qualitative research is more than simple appropriateness for the task at hand" (p.37). SCIARRA also takes on the huge question: "Can a researcher employ both quantitative and qualitative methods and still maintain a coherent and honest research identity?" (p.46). His discussion addressing this question is enlightening and cautionary. He writes: "Although we are cautious in recommending multi-method studies, we do believe that there is a time and place for combining diverse methods in the same study" (p.56). [17]

PONTEROTTO and GRIEGER's Chapter 5, "Merging qualitative and quantitative perspectives in a research identify" counterpoints SCIARRA's ideas in Chapter 4. They are more optimistic than SCIARRA about the viability of using a multi-method approach. Using multicultural theories as the foundation for their claims, they suggest that individuals can see reality from different perspectives, across cultures, thus researchers can do the same, blend methods. Readers interested in more fully understanding the "compatibility of both qualitative and quantitative methods in sequenced studies, or even within the same study" (p.61) will learn a great deal from reading this chapter. [18]

Cori CIEURZO and Merle A. KEITEL's Chapter 6 focuses on the ethics of practice among qualitative research psychologists. This chapter more fully addresses issues related to psychological investigations than Chapters 1-5 which were more general reviews of issues for qualitative researchers across disciplines. CIEURZO and KEITEL's main point is that qualitative researchers who "give back to others will not only benefit the people being studied but also the researcher and the profession as a whole" (p.74). This chapter is a must read for the authors' well-written and accessible discussion on a range of ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, deception, interpretation and ownership. [19]

The purpose of Patricia O'Brien LIBUTTI's Chapter 7, "The Internet and qualitative research: Opportunities and constraints on analysis of cyberspace discourse" was to provide a brief overview of how computers are used in qualitative research designs. LIBUTTI's main take-home-message, however, states the obvious. She writes that cyberspace will provide "the chance for original analysis of work, recreational, and learning environments [and] should be rewarding for both the researchers and the society being reflected through new lenses" (p.87). Readers will find that this chapter is overly ambitious and is already outdated. [20]

Sally D. STABB's Chapter 8, "Teaching qualitative research in psychology," is an honest, first person narrative of "one faculty member's journey in developing a qualitative course" (p.98) for a Counseling Psychology department. Literally, this chapter is a nine-page story (interspersed with reflections) of STABB's use of her "largely self-taught" (p.89) knowledge of qualitative methodology to design a syllabus for her course, "Qualitative Research methods." STABB includes a four-page syllabus as well as thirty-six verbatim student assessments of her course that were redundant and tedious to read. Additionally, and with all due respect to Sally STABB, her story reads somewhat like a tenure-review course assessment. Certainly many psychological researchers also teach, and a chapter of this nature is not a complete misfire. This chapter, however, does seem a bit of a misfit and out of sync with the other chapters, at least in terms of the tenets of *using* qualitative research. A criticism that I have about STABB's chapter is one of the same criticisms that I have of the entire book. In STABB's chapter, syllabus, and reflection, the emphasis is on qualitative research methods, not necessarily on qualitative research methods *in psychology*. The strength of STABB's chapter is the value it will hold for professors, across disciplines, who are designing qualitative research methods courses. [21]

Contance T. FISCHER's Chapter 8, "Designing Qualitative research reports for publication," is a valuable and practical addition to this volume. In this chapter she discusses how she became a qualitative researcher and what she has learned about writing her findings for publication. Every qualitative researcher who wants to publish in mainstream journals should read this chapter. [22]

With Chapters 10, 11, and 12 KOPALA and SUZUKI's book finally begins to address specifics related to the application of qualitative research in psychology. Although some mention of psychology, in relationship to qualitative research, was made before Chapter 10, it does rather feel like it's taken nine chapters to get to application. These three chapters written by esteemed scholars are, nonetheless, worth the wait. [23]

Lisa A. SUZUKI, Maria PRENDES-LINTEL, Lauren WERTLIEB and Amena STALLINGS' Chapter 10, "Exploring multicultural issues using qualitative methods," addresses one of the most important areas of psychological research. They provide their concerns and recommendations for approaching research questions related to the lived experiences of research participants across culture (p.123). The authors provide insightful and practical considerations for data

collection and analysis that will benefit qualitative and quantitative researchers alike. Nancy Salkin ASHER and Kenneth Chavinson ASHER's Chapter 11, "Qualitative methods for an outsider looking in: Lesbian women and body image" is an overview of a four-year qualitative research study. Nancy Salkin ASHER interviewed nine lesbians to investigate if lesbians "somehow escaped current pressures to look thin and beautiful and whether this cultural incubation somehow led to stronger, healthier body images: (p.136). This chapter describes the difficulties in conducting qualitative research without researcher identity (N.S. ASHER is not a lesbian). ASHER also includes an interesting discussion about the importance and steps in conducting member checks (i.e., asking research participants for their input on one's interpretations) in order to strengthen the validity of one's research findings. [24]

Niobe WAY and Kerstin PAHL's Chapter 12, "Friendship patterns among urban adolescent boys" is another detailed account of the design and results of a qualitative study. The appeal of this chapter is that it describes how qualitative research is responsive to the trends in psychological research. WAY and PAHL explain that there has been a "recent call by friendship researchers to conduct more descriptive research on adolescent friendships ... [Researchers know more] about what predicts the quality of friendships ... than we do about the quality of those friendships themselves" (p.147). WAY and PAHL's chapter shows how their investigation provides this needed description. Over one year, a diverse team of researchers interviewed 42 adolescent boys diverse by race and culture. Two strengths of this chapter are: 1) the detailed account of data collection and analysis, and 2) the rationale for using qualitative research methods to study the nature of relationships. This chapter is a "must read" for those interested in study design and data analysis strategies. [25]

The final five chapters of KOPALA and SUZUKI's book are devoted to qualitative research in a therapeutic context and as it relates to action research and evaluation. Joy M. TANJI's Chapter 13, "Capturing the process of family therapy as social meaning construction," takes a look at family processes through a qualitative methods lens. In Chapter 14, Virginia O'BRIEN and Mary KOPALA consider the complexities of using qualitative research in investigations related to clinical practice, specifically the power dynamics involved in clinical supervision. Michelle MAHER's Chapter 15, "Relationship-based change: A feminist qualitative research case," adds to other ideas presented throughout this book about the importance of attending to the relationship between the researcher and the research participant. MAHER also emphasizes how qualitative research results can actually be used to advance socio-political change. MAHER's chapter is worth reading word-for-word. Particularly satisfying are her thoughts on what it means to be identified as a feminist researcher. [26]

John O'NEILL, Barbara B. SMALL, and John STRACHAN's Chapter 16, "The use of focus groups within a participatory action research environment," presents a convincing argument for using focus groups to answer questions regarding lived experiences. Specifically they provide details on their focus group design and

findings from their investigation of employment related issues for persons with HIV/AIDS. [27]

The final chapter in this book is Leo GOLDMAN's Chapter 17, "Qualitative research in program evaluation," where he shares the practical and valuable strategies used to determine if "something works" (p.211). GOLDMAN defines various types of evaluations and provides an example of one of his investigations of an inner-city high school. [28]

4.3 Advancing the field

This book demonstrates that the "grandparents" of the quiet movement toward greater acceptance of qualitative research methods in psychology are no longer standing alone in defense of an idea. The voices of the junior and senior scholars whose chapters appear in this book are strong and clear. It is thrilling to observe the re-emergence of a long-neglected, undervalued, and underutilized research tool. KOPALA and SUZUKI's preface illustrates why this re-emergence of qualitative methodologies is so essential:

"[Patterning the field of psychology after hard science] has such an impact that the emphasis on quantitative methodology continues even though much psychological research may be irrelevant to actual practice ... Neglect of qualitative methods in psychological research has limited the kinds of questions that can be studied" (p.ix). [29]

This book scaffolds the tenets and utility of qualitative methods to an exciting new level and adds dimension to the arguments in favor of this approach. It extends beyond the perspectives of educational psychologists on qualitative research to the perspectives of those concerned with clinical and applied studies. The authors show us not only why qualitative methods are equal in value to quantitative methods but they also provide eight examples of studies that use qualitative data collection and analysis (i.e., chapters 10-17). [30]

To some extent, all of the authors in this volume are trained in applied psychology, a limited but logical base for discussions of qualitative research. Fifteen of the twenty-five authors, for example, have training in counseling psychology. Additionally, KOPALA and SUZUKI add impressive credentials. They have served as past co-chairs of the Special Interest Group on Qualitative Methods in Teaching and Research in the Division of Counseling Psychology for the American Psychological Association. [31]

4.4 A book as metaphor

KOPALA and SUZUKI's book is an apt metaphor for the relationship between psychology and qualitative research methodology. As psychological researchers increasingly lean toward a narrative philosophy and approach to more fully understand the human condition, quantitative research designs are viewed more proportionate to their worth. KOPALA and SUZUKI's book is proof that qualitative

methods are becoming more valued as a viable option for psychological researchers. This shows increased acceptance, at least among applied psychological researchers, that quantitative designs are no longer the exclusive route to truth telling. [32]

Still, the field of qualitative research methods in psychology is truly in its infancy. When compiling an edited volume on any topic, the goal is often to plan chapters that hold together. In reading KOPALA and SUZUKI's book I sensed a "disconnect" on several levels. The promise of the book's title is that readers will learn more about *using* qualitative methods in psychology. Yet, Section I, half of the book, was much like a primer on qualitative methods, in general. Such information is, of course, valuable but it was striking to note that only about half of this book directly pertained to the actual use qualitative methods *in psychology*. [33]

In considering this book further, I was also struck by the variation in the focus of each chapter. This reviewer had to stretch at the start of each chapter in order to link the focus of the chapter to the book's overall purpose. The various types of disconnects (across Sections, among chapters, and parts) reflect a sort of metaphor for the relationship that psychology has to qualitative research methods. KOPALA and SUZUKI'S *Using qualitative methods in psychology* is somewhat fragmented as is the acceptance of qualitative methods even among psychological researchers. The good news is that KOPALA and SUZUKI's offers hope for a more integrated approach to answering questions about the human condition. [34]

4.5 Failure to deliver all

In addition to its value KOPALA and SUZUKI's book has some limitations. For one, they set out to remedy the problem that research methods textbooks provide too little by only devoting one chapter to qualitative methods. KOPALA and SUZUKI seem to have taken the solution to the opposite extreme. They tried to cover too much ground in one volume thus diminishing the importance of their message in yet another way. [35]

A 200-page book that attempts to cover everything we need to know about using qualitative research in psychology does not best serve psychology. Without a doubt psychology needs qualitative research methods presented in a way that are accessible but we need a series of books. Sage (and the book's editors) could have better served their readers and the field by more clearly acknowledging that this volume inadequately addresses the vastness of one of the most exciting junctures in the history of psychological research. This book earns high honors for what it is but it is skimpy in relation to what the field of qualitative research methods in psychology needs. For example, KOPALA and SUZUKI's book could have easily been at least two books; each section of this book deserves even greater detail. [36]

4.6 Limited scope

Other shortcomings of KOPALA and SUZUKI's book are its limited perspective and scope. On one hand it is wonderful to see clinicians leading the field to higher ground, but on the other hand it still must be recognized that most of this volume's authors are trained in the field of counseling psychology. These authors, as I am sure that they would agree, offer a view that is at least somewhat hindered by the insights and perspectives that have gleaned from their discipline's focus. [37]

The scope of this book is also somewhat limited. It is curious, for example, that this book does not also feature the theories and investigations of leading feminist researchers in the field of developmental psychology who for some time now have advanced the use of qualitative research methods. The qualitative research studies of Harvard's Carol GILLIGAN and Annie ROGERS, for example, stand out as a huge literature missing from KOPALA and SUZUKI's book. This reviewer is familiar with the support for and advances in qualitative research methods at Harvard's Human Development and Psychology program (HDP) and notices the lack of any reference to the work of many alumni who are also advancing this field. In defense of this work, it appears that at least one of the authors in this volume, Niobe WAY, has studied at HDP and her chapter is an excellent example of a rigorously designed qualitative study that uses semi-clinical interviews. This suggests that the authors are linked to other researchers who are advancing this field and perhaps by now are publishing works that takes their ideas even further. [38]

On a final note, since the publication of this book in 1999 the story of qualitative research methods in psychology has taken many turns. In fact, we are now ready for the next book that will showcase the strides that have been made in this area. Perhaps future books will include the important but arguably pivotal work of Carol GILLIGAN, Annie ROGERS, and Sara LAWRENCE-LIGHTFOOT and their students who have taken their place in the ranks of innovators such as Dorothy ABRAM, Mary CASEY, Katherine GEISMAR, Eleanor DRAGO-SEVERSON, Holly KREIDER, Michael NAKKULA, Kate O'NEILL, and Mignonne POLLARD, to name a few. Perhaps Sage's next work in this field will include these researchers and others who are contributing to the credibility of qualitative research on a daily basis. Future books on this topic will likely include much more on the poetics of research and narrative inquiry, which are also lacking in this volume. [39]

5. Conclusion

In closing, although KOPALA and SUZUKI overestimate what they can deliver in this volume, the book remains an important step in the right direction toward a fuller acceptance of qualitative research methods in psychology. By its mere publication, this book both validates and advances the field. Psychology professors, in graduate programs especially, will find value in this book as a supplemental text (as a primary text it would be lacking) and for critical analyses of the qualitative research agenda. The authors provide theoretical grounding, practical guidelines, and examples of qualitative research that are all worth

reading. This book provides timely and convincing evidence that qualitative psychological research is alive and well, here to stay, and full of promise. Psychology is better for having this book and its existence is encouragement for other qualitative researchers to write about and publish more interesting books on this much-needed topic. [40]

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