

Review:

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David Silverman (2001). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (second edition). London / Thousand Oaks / New Delhi: Sage, 325 pages, ISBN 0-7619-6864-4 (Cloth): £ 55.-, ISBN 0-7619-6865-2 (pbk): £ 17.99

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Abstract: The second edition of SILVERMAN's volume on *Interpreting Qualitative Data* is a fascinating book and will be invaluable to lecturers and advisers of graduate students. It includes enlightening discussions of ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, of Discourse Analysis and ordinary talk, as well as of what can be learned from visual (non-linguistic) materials. As a textbook, however, it suffers from overload. Apart from methods of analysis there is extensive treatment of how to begin research, data collection, as well as models and ethics in research. Every chapter begins and ends with a summary of key points, includes student activities, and provides profuse examples of the points raised (many from the personal experience of the author). The very comprehensiveness of the book is likely to undermine its usefulness for *potential* researchers—students, who are looking for plain guidance. For advanced researchers, it provides a provocative encounter with a distinguished researcher, theoretician, and pedagogue.

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1. Field

As KOELBL (2001) points out in his review of BOHNSACK's *Introduction to Qualitative Research* there are several different types of literature dealing with philosophy, methods, applications. In English, introductory texts are legion. Some presume to introduce the field of qualitative research as a whole (see, for example, MAYKUT & MOREHOUSE, 1994). Others deal at some length with designated research methods and goals, such as ethnography, action research, and biographical research (among others: HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1992; KEMMIS & McTAGGART, 1988; RUNYAN, 1982). In line with this approach, the Sage Qualitative Research Series undertakes to summarize problems, methods and examples of particular aspects of qualitative research in booklets of approximately eighty pages each (see, for example, FELDMAN, 1995; RIESSMAN, 1993). In the field of educational research, MILES and

HUBERMAN's (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis* is based almost exclusively on the authors' own research project that included several schools. Because of this, the volume turns into a manual on what it takes to carry out a large project *and* on how to analyze a large body of data systematically. The *Handbook on Social Science Research* edited by DENZIN and LINCOLN (1994; second edition, 2000) presents an attempt to cover the entire field. It includes essays on the philosophical underpinnings of different kinds of qualitative research, on planning research, on the varieties of possible methods of collecting data, on modes of analysis, and on writing, all anchored in solid surveys of the research literature. Still, researchers in different fields are constantly discovering new ways of looking at and using qualitative research; it is also important to find diverse ways to enlighten the growing cadre of interested students. [1]

2. An Addition to the Shelf

The second edition of SILVERMAN's volume on *Interpreting Qualitative Data* is a welcome addition to the shelf. David SILVERMAN is a formidable scholar. He has published a great deal, written and edited books on conducting qualitative research (SILVERMAN, 1985, 1997, 2000). Moreover, the jacket of the new edition bears recommendations from two well-known theoreticians who have themselves made significant contributions to explicating principles and practices of qualitative research—Norman DENZIN and Jonathan POTTER. I join DENZIN unreservedly in praising the thoroughness, the knowledgeability and the academic integrity of the author. I also agree with POTTER's statement that this volume will be invaluable to lecturers and advisers of graduate students. SILVERMAN has been a leader in disseminating honest and credible accounts of qualitative research. And he has passed on information to generations of grateful students. It is a privilege to share the experience of a reflective veteran theoretician and researcher. [2]

Paradoxically, however, the very richness of the material, and the openness of the author invite us to critique. There is, I feel, a need to look at the text from the vantage point of the implied audience: researchers and *potential* researchers—students, who are looking for help in doing a good job. Those readers are not likely to approach the volume with the goal of using it to assess the author's academic standing. From their perspective, I feel it is important to examine the volume by relating to the topics covered, the structuring of the chapters, the exercises suggested, and the possible uses of the book in teaching and learning. [3]

3. Topics

The secondary heading of SILVERMAN's book is *Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. Indeed, this focus is fairly unusual in books on qualitative research and it is, simply by being there, an important contribution to the repertoire of the serious researcher. Indeed, the discussions of ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, of Discourse Analysis and ordinary talk, as well as of what can be learned from visual (non-linguistic) materials are enlightening. SILVERMAN explains the sources of each type of

approach and provides instructions for procedures that are clear, if not exhaustive. [4]

As a matter of fact, however, methods of analysis are only part of the content. Of the ten chapters, there is one on "Beginning research" and one that undertakes to clarify the perennial socio-philosophical issue: "What is qualitative research?" Moreover, data collection (rather than interpretation) is treated quite extensively in chapters on ethnography and interviewing, as well as in the chapter on "naturally occurring talk". SILVERMAN discusses at some length models of research and questions of ethics. There are undeniably defensible reasons for including reflections on the underlying philosophy of research in general and of qualitative research in particular, for reminding students of how data can and should be collected, and for reminding people of the obstacles to producing a good piece of research. But this is accomplished at a relatively high price. Breadth is achieved at the expense of a clear focus on the explicit *raison d'être* of the book. [5]

Another problem can be seen in SILVERMAN's assumptions about the desirable theoretical baggage that researchers need. He writes about models of interpretation in Chapter One and his conceptualization of the quasi-philosophical underpinning of qualitative research comes up regularly in the course of the book. Quoting GUBRIUM and HOLSTEIN (1997) on "idioms", SILVERMAN presents lengthy treatments of problems that arise for researchers who identify with models generated by naturalism, ethnomethodology, emotionalism, and/or post-modernism. He seems to assume that all researchers, and even students, can be thoroughly aware of the models of reality that infuse their choices of problems and their approaches to interpretation. This is a questionable supposition at best. Were it true that the researcher chooses a model and then goes on to do the project, qualitative researchers would be able to define niches far more clearly than they have been able to so far. People (and certainly students) struggling with the challenges that spring up anew with every qualitative research undertaking, know that awareness of one's "affiliation" with models and with kinds of theory is usually achieved, or better, discovered, in retrospect for the most part, often quite late in a researcher's career. [6]

The chapter on validity, reliability and generalization makes some odd proposals. The theme is quality control, and there is no doubt but that qualitative research must clarify the bases for deciding what constitutes good research and what an acceptable interpretation of findings should be. This does not, however, justify sticking to problematic terminology. After acknowledging and detailing the weaknesses of the conceptualization of reliability and validity on the home ground of quantitative research, SILVERMAN insists on applying these same terms for deciding the quality of every kind of research. He is, for example, adamant about testing for validity, i.e., for the "truthfulness" of evidence, even though he agrees with most qualitative theorists that this is a highly dubious goal. The solution he propounds is a reliance on theoretical models to escape cultural bias, and a dedication to methods such as analytic induction, constant comparative method, deviant case analysis. These are all undoubtedly important for making clear the basis of a researcher's findings and conclusions. By insisting that these methods

assure "validity", SILVERMAN is defending the positivistic postulate that every type of social science has to be committed to discovering *the* truth, even though throughout the book he defends a constructionist perspective. Furthermore, in order to integrate the term "reliability", he follows SEALE (1999), assigning a minimalistic definition that in fact negates any common sense meaning of the term. In his description of how to test reliability, he recommends ascertaining whether statements / questions / exclamations are coded in similar ways by researchers. In this way, he circumvents the issue of the possibility of establishing reliable interpretations of the semantic and pragmatic content of the data. [7]

By contrast with some adherents to qualitative research, among them people who are willing to recognize almost any kind of typifying narrative as a scientific report (cf. DENZIN, 1997), I agree with SILVERMAN that work worthy of being called "research" is not the same as creative writing. It is however highly questionable whether the scientism disclosed by preserving ambiguous terminology is useful. Unfortunately, SILVERMAN gives less than adequate treatment to the criteria that are most promising for quality control in qualitative research, namely: plausibility, constant renewal of discussion among the relevant publics, making data available for review by other researchers. [8]

4. Structure of the Chapters

The underlying structure of each chapter is clear. SILVERMAN begins with key questions, develops his theses about the topics noted, and at the end of the chapter summarizes in conclusions, adding a concise list of "key points". Still, the structure suffers from some diffusion. As SILVERMAN explains, he has taken a cue from KUHN's description of how paradigms of "normal science" are disseminated, and follows through providing examples of researches and descriptions of how they were done. In a word, every chapter is loaded, and to my mind, overloaded, with examples of published research that are, therefore, assumed to have been successful. Apart from accomplishing the debatable ideological objective of establishing that qualitative research has achieved the status of normal science, the examples are problematic in two ways: The researches were, of course, not carried out to illustrate specific didactic aims and the relevance is problematic. SILVERMAN provides extensive descriptions of the entire exemplary research and this tends to blur the connections between the research and the topic of the chapter. Moreover, the author shares with the readers concerns about problems that came up in the course of the research, in relation to preliminary decisions about collecting data, as well as in relation to alternative procedures in interpretation that might have been possible. In several cases, he also rightly criticizes the work. Admirable as this honesty and frankness are, students who need relatively clear guidelines are likely to be confused by the protracted discussions. [9]

And there is no doubt that in writing *Interpreting Qualitative Research*, SILVERMAN did have students in mind. Every chapter is equipped with exercises, and the author goes so far as to recommend at what points in the chapter, each exercise should be attempted. Many of the exercises are

interesting and creative. Others are pedestrian but make good teaching-learning sense. A weakness is the lack of consideration for their viability. Whereas some of the tasks require at most a careful rereading of parts of a chapter, and a thoughtful but bounded response, others demand an investment of time analogous to that needed for producing a summative term paper. The distribution throughout each chapter is also somewhat confining for the lecturer who can find them useful, and in some cases, even inspiring; but may not agree with the logic of their interpellation. As I followed the exercises, I had the feeling that SILVERMAN was presenting a selection of "projects that worked" with different groups of students rather than, as the arrangement seems to promise, an integrated design of coursework. The customary arrangement of collecting the exercises in an appendix would have been more helpful. [10]

5. In Sum ...

Interpreting Qualitative Research is not, to my mind, an efficient textbook. Yet, when all is said and done, this is a rich resource for lecturers and for experienced researchers. For an informed audience, it is a good read and a learning experience. Because the book is thorough and the approach is provocatively personal, the reader is catapulted into debates with herself, with the author, and with the people he quotes. There is the added value of providing a happy opportunity to follow the modes of thought of a serious theoretician, researcher and pedagogue. And with the burgeoning of biographical research, this saga (even though apparently not planned as such) of a career in the service of a scientific vision is a document of distinct value. [11]

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