QUALITATIVE RESEARCHING BEYOND TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Henning, E with Van Rensburg, W & Smit, B (2004) **Finding your way in qualitative research**. Pretoria: Van Schaik. ISBN 0-627-02545-5 pbk. Pages 179.

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Finding your way in qualitative research is not simply another qualitative research instruction manual offering tools, techniques and tricks for coding, or quick fixes for methodological mayhem. The text is aimed at social science students and researchers, and while it offers some how-to basics, it mainly claims to attend to "positioning" an investigation within epistemological, theoretical and design logics, and the practice of writing in qualitative inquiry. As its title suggests, *finding your way*, the text itself is conceived to work inductively to scaffold qualitative inquiry as a process, culminating in "qualitative research design" - as positioned methodological argumentation in writing proposals or reports – in the concluding chapter. As such, **Finding your way in qualitative research** is situated within an illustrious genre of qualitative research texts attending to paradigmatically situated, in-depth *processes* of inquiry, design, argument and writing for particular "audiences" (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Silverman, 2000). These texts function primarily as overview portals through which other more specialized or applied qualitative methods may be hyperlinked at strategic moments, to fashion a design-concordant, convincing and defendable argument.

Finding your way in qualitative research is the collaborative work of three (South African university) Education Department based teachers of qualitative research methodology and research-text writing. Their extensive pedagogical experience has found their students as "good" at the empirically investigative (doing) parts of research practice, but "not so good" at the arguing (writing) parts due to lacking or patchy exposure to the miscellany of philosophies and meta-assumptions that inscribe qualitative research. In a preface, the authors set up two main propositions – the "logics of design" and the "discursive quality of data" – that will guide the text's work in shaping methodological argumentation around a study's epistemological "home" and warrant of its truth-claims. Chapters carve the process of reasoning about inquiry into predictable bites, viz. qualitative research questions, frameworks, designs, data-gathering tactics, interpretive analysis and design/writing that maximizes validity. I will dip into aspects of these chapters and arguments.

Chapter 1 begins, inauspiciously, by defining "qualitative research" through hackneyed opposition to "quantitative research"; and then distinguishes outmoded "thin" qualitative research (i.e. naïve realistic, naturalistic, quasi-positivistic, descriptive of content) from a "thicker", richly contextualized, interpretive variety. These binary-isms are continued through exposition of paradigmatic frameworks in Chapter 2, as positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative) aims; but are briefly leavened through addition of critical research – as progressive, standpoint research geared towards "emancipation" (e.g. feminist or action research). While some paradigmatic diversity and "informed choice" is bandied about, interpretive research (loosely), with its multileveled meaning-making capacities, appears to be the focal framework in **Finding your way in qualitative research**. Where this chapter is innovative is in Henning's sharing of her experience of teaching qualitative research frameworks to students. This teaching is most effective when it actively deconstructs paradigmatic and theoretical assumptions within the aims and concrete questions of postgraduate students' own research projects; thus weaving "methodology teaching" and "research supervision" into one participative, scaffolded, pedagogical space.

Chapter 3 works with the notion of qualitative design genres or types as an epistemological (and methodological) "home". This "home" refers to "the way the research procedures are linked together to constitute a cohesive whole" (p31); and serves as descriptor of the research tradition in which the researcher conducts the study and presents it to its audience/s. Thus, a (bounded) case study as a design genre that uses phenomenological discourse might be named "a phenomenological case study". Links between design genres and methodologies are further illustrated through ethnographic, grounded theory, action research and narrative/discourse studies. The authors rightly warn unwitting novices against straddling opposing research traditions in the hallowed name of triangulation – boundary-crossings are said to require "fancy epistemological footwork" (p33). Novices are advised to opt for "goodness of fit" or "typecasting", as conventionalized, guiding design logics gleaned through comprehensive understandings of theoretical, methodological and empirical literatures in relevant fields.

I have two related critical points about the above "homes". Firstly, the imperative of "typecasting" a seamless or concordant design logic is contradicted in (or certainly discombobulated from) a later chapter in **Finding your way in qualitative research** on analysis and interpretation (Chapter 6, see below). Secondly, a (critical) social constructionist perspective not considered by the authors would assert that, while such design logics produce defendable rationales and admirable validities for research studies, they swirl research questions, data collection tactics and methods of analysis into solipsistic eddies of truth-regime reproduction (Danziger, 1994).

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to "capturing data" in qualitative research inquiry through interviewing, observation and documentation technologies. The tone and texture of these chapters are out of synch with the rest of **Finding your way in qualitative research** in that they are dense with technical how-to that is freely available elsewhere as basics. The chapter on interviewing contains, for example, lengthy expositions of sampling, thematic interview-schedule production, ethics and phrasing questions to maximize so-called rapport

in the interview itself. A crucial connection in a text that aims at design-concordance, and missing or very poorly achieved here, is the technical manufacture of material that is interpretable through specific analytical methods (e.g. a biographical interview produces storied material to be analyzed through a narrative-structuring approach). The text simplistically counterpoises a binary "division" of interviewing technologies – as "standardized interviewing", which seeks not to contaminate data through leading questions, and "discursively oriented interviewing", which valorizes inter-subjectivity in communicative events – to highlight the thematic, dynamic and contextual complexity of interview-talk. Thus, "making data beyond the bare text" (p65) is advocated as a broadly interpretivist position/principle; but it is by no means clear how such complex "discursive events" would then be analyzed.

The marks of Kvale's (1996) *inter-views* as inter-subjectivities are powerfully etched on ideas in the above chapter on interviewing. But Kvale's influence is sadly not transferred to a following chapter on analysis and interpretation (Chapter 6), which is undoubtedly the weakest link in **Finding your way in qualitative research**. It is weak precisely because it presents a woolly, generic interpretivist approach to analysis – rather than Kvale's advocacy of a particular interpretive method situated in a distinctive intellectual tradition and set of agendas, to answer a research question posed. Chapter 6 presents "coding" and "categorization" as a theory-neutral kind of qualitative content analysis – "a tool for reduced, condensed and grouped data" (p104). This preliminary analysis is then sexed up through a miscellany of other "tools" apparently eclectically imported to do particular interpretive work; and to restore the context of categorized material through recourse to so-called "global analysis" of networked themes. There are "thick description" tricks from ethnography (e.g. provide detail on context and process of the study, represent data visually, etc.); but, astonishingly, grounded theory pops up as "a tool for constructing substantive theories" (p114), discourse analysis as "tools for finding the meaning in form" (p117), narrative analysis as "looking for story markers" (p122), and so on.

This *bricoleur*-toolbox metaphor usefully highlights the idea that particular "tools" may be put to particular kinds of interpretive work – viz. don't use a hammer when a screwdriver will do – but it dangerously avoids positioning them (the "tools") as cohesive frameworks with distinctive design logics and technical vernaculars that should be respected for design-concordance. This means they are *either/or* – and *not all/any* - meaning-making strategies that are intimately interconnected with research questions, data-collection tactics, and ultimately, truth-claims. My own postgraduate novices who were given this chapter as an overview of methods of qualitative analysis believed they had to use as many methods as possible, simultaneously, for "good research" (e.g. find a story's plot here, a theory over there, analyze this piece of conversation now, and spot some discourses later on). This was great fun, but produced a hodge-podge from which even the most creative writing could extricate threads of coherence. Their misperceptions were not a misunderstanding of instructions issued in **Finding your way in qualitative research**; indeed the authors actively propagate this *bricoleur* view, apparently cadged from ethnography and grounded theory: "The same piece of data text may be analyzed in many ways, depending on the reason for the analysis. For a strong research argument, the more methods of analysis used, the better the chances of research crystallizing into good craftsmanship" (p140).

And so, with interpretation running wildly in several directions at once, **Finding your way in qualitative research** enters its finale, Chapter 7, in pursuit of crystallization and craftsmanship. These are established through retreat to a generic "interpretive research", seemingly to fence out ontological, epistemological and methodological incoherence within/between frameworks. Scholarly criteria for evaluating warrant of knowledge-claims are given as crafting coherence through design logic and persuasive argument, systematic and ethical procedures, and explicating innovative and/or pragmatic consequences of inquiry. These criteria, and the chapter in general, shamefully waters down Kvale's (1996) strong argument about paradigmatically different truth-claims that appeal to distinctive audiences for validation, viz. respondents themselves, lay publics or communities of scholars. This would have followed through the stated aims of logical design-concordance to the writing-research practice. As it stands, the novice is left with this discomforting homily: "(t)he process of representation of the originally *messy research reality* and the equally *fuzzy theoretical (mine)field* is a craft and an art that can only develop with practice" (p154).

In conclusion, despite my clear objections, **Finding your way in qualitative research** has some aspects worthy of commendation as it's on the right track. It is a qualitative research text that emphasizes the "discursive activity" of research writing, and of epistemological and methodological "argument". It does not necessarily trash/prefer frameworks, design logics or methodologies per se, but inscribes the fundamental impacts of their manufacture on our findings as truthful or useful knowledge. It is not an easy how-to text to read, but requires closer attention to its arguments about research practice. The many wisdoms in/of *finding your way* are hard-won through the authors' experience teaching of research methodology and research-writing.

As the authors hoped the text would do, **Finding your way in qualitative research** challenged conventional pathways of learning about methodology; for me, as a qualitative research teacher/supervisor, this challenge was directed at teaching-research in postgraduate psychology programmes in two ways. Firstly, it challenged the bifurcation of pedagogies we assert through maintenance of methodology-modules and research-supervision as separable spaces for learning. Secondly, it challenged the prescription of reading lists of isolated chapters/articles on "this technique" or "that framework". This re-inscribed the need to prescribe whole textbooks as sustained "arguments" about qualitative research-writing, that transcend technicist how-to instructions for phenomenological reduction or analysis of discursive practices. I will go back to Kvale though.

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