

Book review:

A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about qualitative research (Silverman, 2013)

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For researchers concerned with understanding and enhancing the learner experience in higher education, qualitative research is central to our work. Yet the range of texts purporting to explain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of qualitative practice can be quite bewildering, particularly for students who are new to this field. David Silverman is widely recognised as an authority on qualitative social research and has built up an impressive body of work in this field (Silverman, 2010; 2011; 2012). In this revised edition of his book, originally published in 2007, Silverman (2013) sets out to debunk many of the conventions and preoccupations of qualitative research. The result is a lively and deliberately provocative tour of the world of ethnographic approaches to research.

The author describes the book as a ‘pre-textbook’ (p.ix) and this is evident in the tone and overall aims. This is not a typical research methods text providing researchers and students with an easily digestible ‘how to’ manual of qualitative research techniques. Rather, Silverman sets out to provoke reflection and debate on the ways in which we perceive qualitative research, as well as provide a critical dissection of the ways in which qualitative methods should be, in his view, better applied.

The book begins with a revealing personal account from Silverman of his own background in academia and ethnography. Chapter 1 then argues for the value of the ethnographic ‘gaze’ with reference to a wide range of contemporary social phenomena including celebrity culture, crime and the Internet, whilst developing a historically and theoretically informed approach. From the outset, it is clear that this book is working within a constructionist perspective in which certain strands of discourse and conversation analysis are prioritised. In particular, the work of Harvey Sacks is discussed at length at various points throughout the text. At the same time, Silverman is vocal in his criticisms of what he sees as the excesses of over-theorized approaches to understanding social life.

The next two chapters consider practical issues of data collection (chapter 2) and data analysis (chapter 3). Silverman is highly critical of typical approaches to these two areas. ‘*Manufactured data*’ (p.32), including interviews and focus groups, is identified as having an unhealthy hold over qualitative research, and the book provides a persuasive argument for looking instead for ‘*naturally-occurring data*’ (p.84). Similarly, the commonplace approach of mining interview transcripts for de-contextualised extracts is rejected in favour of collecting ‘*interactional sequences*’ (p.84) in order to better understand the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of behaviour. Silverman is especially suspicious of what he sees as a widespread tendency of researchers to cherry pick from interview data such that the meaning of qualitative data is reconfigured and reinterpreted. Chapter 4 is a useful discussion of the social context of qualitative research with particular reference to research into healthcare practice. In chapter 5, Silverman rallies against what he

defines as a postmodern turn by critiquing experimental approaches to ethnographic work. In response, he identifies a set of aspirational standards for qualitative research based on more essentialist qualities including clarity, reason and truth.

Compared to the first edition of this book, this new edition contains two useful additional elements. Firstly, there is an entertaining but brief glossary of 'received ideas' addressing what Silverman sees as the key misconceptions in conventional approaches to qualitative research. Secondly, there has been an effort to update examples of research practice to incorporate case studies with more contemporary relevance, and Silverman does an admirable job of including copious and wide-ranging examples of practice through the book. Otherwise, the book remains largely unchanged. For me, the text would have benefited from some additional reflections from the author examining how the broader policy or practice-based contexts of doing qualitative research have changed since the publication of the first edition.

For example, in my own field of career development and employability I find that there is a growing pressure to measure the quantifiable, or 'hard', employment outcomes of our initiatives. Student support services are increasingly required to 'prove' the measurable impact of their interactions with students (Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education 2011). The consumerist and quasi market-based context in which careers services in many higher education institutions now function is, to a large degree, pushing practitioners to interpret their own role within this narrow framework. Reading this book was a timely reminder that if we continually interpret professional practice in higher education within these predominantly quantitative terms then we tend to leave these practices '*unexamined and hence unchallenged*' (p.88).

In summary, this is a refreshing and valuable contribution to the crowded literature on qualitative research. This text stands out mainly because Silverman is concerned with stimulating reflection and debate rather than providing a traditional 'how to' approach. The book is undoubtedly written in a way which highlights the real world applications of qualitative practice, as well as emphasising to the reader the implicit value of an ethnographic outlook. At the same time, the polemic nature of Silverman's approach means that he also delves deeply into key theoretical and epistemological debates over the nature and purpose of social research. However, the intended audience of the book is ambiguous. In my opinion, most undergraduate students are unlikely to be familiar with the range of literature referenced by Silverman or to have developed substantive experience with ethnographic methods. As such, this book seems best suited to the postgraduate researcher or academic interested in de-mystifying and challenging established ways of doing qualitative work.

References

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