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Book Review

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, SAGE Publications, 2013, Pages: xiii + 382, Price: GBP 28.99 (LKR 5,900 Approx.), ISBN: 1-84787-582-2

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Introduction

As suggested by its title, *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* is written for beginners venturing into qualitative research, especially from a perspective of “Big Q qualitative research” or research undertaken within a “qualitative paradigm” (p. 4). In describing ‘qualitative paradigm,’ the authors refer to the key assumptions underlying primarily the interpretive/constructivist (Haverkamp & Young, 2007) tradition and the research procedure introduced in the book is located within these assumptions. Although occasional references are made to the positivistic tradition, it is largely for comparison purposes.

At the outset, the authors state that the book is intended mainly for undergraduate or taught postgraduate students within the field of psychology; however, they note that it would be useful for students of other social disciplines as well. True to this claim, the guidelines provided in the book could easily be adopted by students undertaking qualitative research in the arena of Business. In describing the target audience, the book probably specifically names “taught” postgraduate students (p. 14) because it adopts a practical approach in providing guidelines on *how to do* a qualitative research rather than engage in, in-depth theoretical discussions on research methodology. Although such theoretical knowledge is vital for students engaged in higher levels of postgraduate research, this book can provide guidelines on the practical aspects of carrying out the project even for postgraduate research students (MPhil and PhD). It could also be used by instructors as a text book for research methods courses.

Some features of the book are of special value for this intended readership. Each chapter comprises 'Boxes' which the authors use for providing additional information about key concepts and practices. There are also "Illustrative research examples" for the content of the chapters as well as "Material examples," which are examples of research instruments such as interview guides. The discussion questions, further reading and online resources provided at the end of the chapter are useful especially when using the book as the text of a research methods course. The 'overview' at the beginning and 'chapter summary' at the end of each chapter provides quick reference points for the chapter contents. The book also has a companion website that offers additional resources such as multiple-choice questions, additional exercises and readings.

Contents

Starting with an introduction to qualitative research, the main text of *Successful qualitative research* takes the reader through the entire process of designing the research, data collection, analysis and writing up; however, the authors caution that this is "a recursive rather than linear process...going sideways and backwards, as well as forwards" (p. 16, emphasis in original).

The book is divided into four main sections: Section 1, titled 'Successfully getting started in qualitative research' is devoted to "some of the basic issues in qualitative research, and covers aspects of planning and design" (p. 15). This section comprises three chapters, the first of which spells out the context, scope and approach of the book, namely, a practical approach to interpretive qualitative research in psychology. This includes a brief, simple introduction to the complexity of the field of qualitative research with reference to some paradigmic differences. The second chapter discusses ten key characteristics of qualitative research. It includes brief discussions on ontological and epistemological assumptions in qualitative research as well as some other key points such as the place of subjectivity, reflexivity and context. The third chapter is on the research design; it broadly discusses the relationship between research questions and the methodology, followed by issues of sampling, research ethics, timeline of research and the research proposal.

Section 2 of the book is titled 'Successfully collecting qualitative data,' and consists of three chapters. The first two of these, chapters 4 and 5, provide comprehensive guidelines on the two most prominent methods (Flick, 2007) of qualitative data collection, namely, interviews and focus group discussions. Chapter 6 gives brief introductions to some of the less commonly used methods of collecting data from participants – qualitative surveys, story completion, and researcher-directed diaries – and to collecting pre-existing textual data (e.g. newspapers, magazines, billboard advertisements, etc.).

Section 3, titled 'Successfully analysing qualitative data,' is the longest section of the book, comprising five chapters. The first of these, chapter 7, deals with transcribing audio data in preparation for analysis. Chapter 8 introduces an overview of seven different methods of data analysis. Of these, four are described in some detail: thematic analysis, which the authors had previously developed into a systematic technique based on some other available methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006), interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded theory (GT), and pattern-based discourse analysis (DA). In addition, brief introductions are given to discursive psychology, conversation analysis, and narrative analysis. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 provide detailed guidelines on conducting a thematic analysis, dealing with coding, identifying patterns, and interpreting patterns respectively. Each of these chapters also

contains sections that discuss how IPA, GT and DA differ from thematic analysis in each of these stages of data analysis.

The final section, ‘Successfully completing qualitative research,’ has two chapters. Chapter 12 discusses the variety and complexity of quality criteria and techniques in qualitative research. It not only compares the quality criteria of quantitative and qualitative research, but also discusses the differences in methodological assumptions behind some of the popular quality assurance techniques used by qualitative researchers. The final chapter of the book is on writing up and communicating the research. It includes guidelines on writing practices, such as continuous writing and editing, and contents of a research report, as well as on presenting a research through oral and poster presentations. The chapter and the book ends with a section titled ‘What about publishing?’ (p. 323), where the authors briefly discuss the possibility and dynamics of publishing output of student research projects.

Evaluation

This book has accomplished its main objective: “to demystify the process of qualitative research, and help emerging qualitative researchers feel they have a grasp of what they need to do to be a *successful* qualitative researcher” (p. 13, emphasis in original). The authors have achieved this end by providing comprehensive guidelines for each step of the qualitative research process from sample selection to data analysis and writing up: indicating the steps to follow, providing examples of how the steps have been carried out in different projects, and even drawing attention to some of the possible pitfalls. In doing this, the authors have also managed to maintain a delicate balance between guiding the researchers and not being too directive. The guidelines they provide are sufficiently broad for individual researchers to adapt to suit their own projects. Therefore, the researcher remains the “primary instrument of inquiry” (Poulin, 2007, p. 436), in the true spirit of interpretive research.

The above characteristic is most clearly visible in the analytical section, which is the strongest section of the book. The thematic analysis technique that the book explicates in detail provides comprehensive and specific guidelines for the novice researcher; however, the technique is also flexible and versatile. Compared to some other commonly accepted generic guidelines for qualitative data analysis (see for example, Miles & Huberman, 1994), this technique is far more flexible in spite of having clear guidelines.

The brief introductions to other analytical methods are also helpful to new researchers who are not familiar with them. It should be noted that some of the “methods of analysis,” (as this book refers to them) are usually discussed elsewhere in much broader terms than simply as analysis techniques; for example, DA has been called a methodology (Philips & Hardy, 2002) and GA and narrative analysis have been termed research designs (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007). However, even while calling them analytical methods, the book accords them their due methodological complexity, even explicitly acknowledging in some places that they are not simply analysis methods. Although the discussions of these research approaches are insufficient by themselves for a researcher to adopt and implement the approaches, they are sufficiently detailed to decide whether an approach may be suitable for one’s research. Compared to some other recent books that offer some comparative explanations of different approaches (e.g. Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2009), the explanations of data analysis in these different research approaches are more comprehensive in this book.

The one notable weakness in this book is that the authors tend to neglect the early parts of the research process that are common to both quantitative and qualitative research, namely, the stages from problem identification to research design. For example, to discuss the literature review the authors devote three pages in the final chapter. Although in these pages they succinctly state the importance of the literature review in developing a rationale for the research problem, it would have been far more effective and helpful to the reader if this discussion had been more detailed and linked to the one on developing research questions (Chapter 3). Similarly, the research design has also been dealt with in a somewhat sketchy manner; after discussing the importance of aligning the research methods to the research questions, the authors jump to a discussion on sampling, followed by timeline. For the novice researcher, it would have been helpful if the book had specified components of a research design and then proceeded to describe the components. This is the usual practice in introductory text books aiming at explaining the entire research process (see for example, Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Sekaran, 2006).

Although the book is not faultless, the strengths of *Successful qualitative research* significantly outweigh its weaknesses in providing guidelines for those embarking on a career of qualitative research. It can be carried by the novice as a handbook to be consulted in all the practical stages of implementing the qualitative research design.

About the Authors

Virginia Braun is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, New Zealand. She has been the Editor of *Feminism & Psychology* (with Nicola Gavey) and has numerous publications in the areas of psychology as well as qualitative research. **Victoria Clarke** is an Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies at the University of the West of England, UK. She has co-authored three other books which have won several awards. Together, Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke developed a flexible approach to thematic analysis.

The book reviewed above, *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* won the Association of Women in Psychology Distinguished Publication Award in 2014, and was short listed for the British Psychological Society Book Award in the same year.

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