

Learning Qualitative Research Methods through Example

Qualitative Research Methods for Psychologists: Introduction through Empirical Studies

Edited by Constance T. Fischer

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Review by Alan Pope

I was excited to learn that Dr. Constance (Connie) Fischer, one of my mentors at Duquesne University, had produced a new book. Her first work, *Individualizing Psychological Assessment* (1985/1994), was hugely influential in how I understand the authentic nature and deepest potentials of psychological assessment, both inside and outside of clinical contexts. In that work, Fischer detailed how to use assessment instruments less as measures than as means for revealing how clients move through their lived worlds. In working collaboratively with clients toward this end, she enlisted them as co-participants in formulating a descriptive understanding of their situation, comportment, and available options. The inspiration for this unique approach derived from her participation in the development of the Duquesne school of empirical phenomenological research methods beginning in the 60s and 70s. Now Fischer returns to her roots in offering us *Qualitative Research Methods for Psychologists*. As with her first book, we find here a compelling integration of philosophical theory and psychological practice. Unlike her first work, this is an edited volume that provides a symphony of accomplished voices articulating a wide variety of qualitative research studies of which the Duquesne-style phenomenological approach is but one kind. As we shall see shortly, Fischer's pluralism yields rich rewards.

The use of qualitative research methods in psychology has lagged behind other human sciences, such as sociology and nursing, owing largely to the historical attempt to frame psychology as a natural science. In adopting a positivistic orientation, natural science methods use experimental means to derive statements of causality or quantitative relationship. While this approach supports the inclusion of large numbers of study participants and effectively captures aspects of our physical nature, it is of limited utility in characterizing the lived meanings of experience. Qualitative research is less interested in explaining phenomena than in understanding them, leading

its researchers to frame their questions with “what” and “how” rather than “why.” In this approach, individual instances of a phenomenon are analyzed and interpreted to reveal explicit and implicit meanings, resulting in a narrative descriptive account. This process relies upon the researcher’s own intuition. As one of the authors, de Rivera, eloquently describes:

The investigator must intuit an abstract symbolic form that succeeds in capturing the essential relationships involved in all concrete individual experiences. Like Michelangelo sculpting, she or he must free the form that lies hidden in the rock. (p. 218)

Although de Rivera is describing a specific methodology called *conceptual encounter*, he captures the spirit of qualitative research in general as a process of uncovering the essential set of relations that structure lived human experience.

Any research approach prefigures one’s method and findings (Giorgi, 1970). Whereas the embedded assumptions guiding quantitative research typically go unexamined, qualitative researchers engage in critical reflection as to how their approach is affecting their results. Although they bracket assumptions as much as possible in their encounter with data, qualitative researchers recognize that they can never fully escape their own presuppositions. Rather than developing truths understood in literal and reified ways, the results of qualitative research are suggestive in a manner that invites the participation of the reader in the formation of meaning and validity. As with Fischer’s own injunction with regard to diagnostic labels—words I shall never forget from my assessment classes with her—the results should be taken “seriously, not literally.” The key question is to what extent the results resonate with the reader, connect with existing theories, and generally shed light on the phenomenon. The encounter with one’s own enculturation, values, and assumptions makes qualitative research in many ways a more rigorous exercise than the more specifically outlined procedures of the experimental method.

What makes this new edited volume unique, in contrast to other books on qualitative research, is that it presents a series of case studies in which the emphasis is given to the research process rather than the results. Just as qualitative research depends on individualized accounts to infer general principles, the intent here is to use specific applications to teach readers how to conduct qualitative research. As such, in contrast to more usual results-

driven presentations, the authors offer the philosophical and pragmatic considerations that frame their research approach, and they provide as much detail as possible to convey the exact procedures that they followed in deriving their results. On this last point there is wide variance, ranging from those researchers who adopt an attitude and framework without stepwise procedures (e.g., Stalling, Leifer, and Rowe) to those who offer exquisite detail of their every step along the way (e.g., Robbins sitting on the floor, scissors in hand, organizing his meaning units). Each chapter, therefore, is a case demonstration that offers what ultimately may be the only way to teach these methods—namely, situated examples.

One of the key themes of this book is that there is no one perfect methodology that researchers can adapt to a given problem; rather, the method must be adapted to the subject matter. On this score, a number of authors provide fascinating innovations in research design, often conflating multiple approaches. For example, in her feminist study of sexually abused women, Morrow combined grounded theory with an *emergent design* that flexes depending on emerging findings and researcher insights. Robbins used an innovative method of data collection, the *imagery in movement method*, whereby he induced feelings of joy in participants in the process of soliciting descriptions of being joyful. In examining the impact of diagnostic categories in patient-staff discourse, Goicoechea used conversation analysis modified and informed by discourse analysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Levers combined participant observation, interviews, and focus groups in finding ways to educate citizens in Botswana about HIV/AIDS, and Halling et al. developed a dialogal approach to studying forgiveness in which the researchers collaborated in groups in performing their analyses and discussing their results.

Of particular interest to me was de Rivera's study of anger for which he used the method of *conceptual encounter*. This approach explicitly employs bottom-up and top-down analyses in a formal dialectic between specific, situated instances of a phenomenon and higher-order conceptualizations. In this practice, the participants are interviewed as in most qualitative research, but then the researcher responds with a conceptualization that can be directed not only to those participants, but to the findings of a wide variety of researchers as well. As such, this method lends itself to the examination of cross-cultural factors, potentially resulting in conclusions with universal applicability. For example, in the presented study de Rivera concludes that anger is a universal attempt to cope with a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be rather than a cultural invention.

Many of the chapters make explicit that qualitative research, when practiced properly, has the capacity to transform the researcher. This insight is exploited most fully in Anderson's *intuitive inquiry*, presented in Esbjörn-Hargens's doctoral study on embodiment in female mystics. This method, which is as rigorous as it is personal, consists of a highly structured sequence of hermeneutic engagements involving the researcher's own personal immersion in the topic, consisting of the involvement of intuitive and compassionate ways of knowing and in-depth, reflective process. Through at least five such cycles, the researcher deeply encounters the phenomenon and modifies, refines, reorganizes, and expands her understanding of it. Interestingly, this method, which is so explicitly geared toward personal involvement and development, is among the most highly structured so as to provide the containment necessary for the transformative work to happen. (In Halling et al.'s unstructured collaborative research, by contrast, containment was provided by social engagement and dialogue.) Accordingly, Anderson implores future researchers not to skip any of the steps outlined in her procedures, even as she welcomes innovative modifications. It is notable, too, that this chapter names two phenomena that I have noticed in my own research: *resonance validity*, the capacity for a study to produce a sympathetic resonance in its readers, and *efficacy validity*, the capacity of a study to give more value to one's life.

Fischer's book is organized into three overarching sections reflecting research content: *clinical practices*, *affective and cognitive processes*, and *life situations*. Although the content of these studies is not the main focus of the book, the variety of topics examined is interesting in its own right. Of particular note, within the clinical studies Rennie and Churchill offer complementary views of the therapeutic relationship, the former providing a fascinating study of the client's experience of psychotherapy, and the latter making thematic the manner in which psychologists form impressions of a client's personality during the interview phase of diagnostic assessment. Nevertheless, the star of this collection is the variety of methods used and the clarity and thoroughness of their explications. The chapters by Churchill and Robbins are excellent introductions to phenomenological research methodology; Rennie provides a clear and compelling introduction to grounded theory; and others illuminate principles of discourse analysis, hermeneutic process, and a variety of innovative approaches, some of which have already been mentioned. As Fischer, herself, points out, the studies by Morrow, Levers, and Goicoechea—although not naming themselves as such—can be taken as examples of action research as well.

The book begins with a helpful introduction by Fischer that provides an overview of the entire process of conducting a research study, including such misunderstood processes as deciding when to use a qualitative approach, picking a topic, deciding on a title, attending to ethical concerns, and incorporating one's own personal experience into the study. Owing to Fischer's intent to make this work especially useful for doctoral students, she includes sections on working with the dissertation committee and writing to publish. Then she leads the reader, step by step, through detailed considerations of each stage of the process, providing foreknowledge with which the ensuing studies might be more deeply understood. Beyond the introduction, Fischer provides a brief summary for each case presentation (chapter), highlighting the features unique to the study and enabling the reader to zero in on those of most interest to him or her. As with Fischer's first book, she provides at the end of the book a section providing answers to frequently asked questions and a glossary of terms, both of which will be of great benefit to beginning researchers while consolidating the understanding of those more experienced.

Although this book is especially geared to doctoral candidates in psychology, it will also help experienced qualitative researchers expand their horizons to learn of new, innovative methods being employed by others. And, of course, it will benefit anyone who wishes to engage qualitative research or simply learn the principles and underlying philosophical issues involved. This group includes master's students, advanced undergraduates, and quantitative researchers both within and outside of psychology. In her usual circumspect way, Fischer warns that reading a book is insufficient for learning this craft—i.e., this is a teaching textbook, not a course in itself. Nevertheless, this work provides an excellent collection of examples that will stimulate the imaginations of beginners and advanced practitioners alike. As such, Fischer's book marks a significant milestone in promoting the increasing acceptance and practice of qualitative research methods in psychology. It is just the book I have been waiting for to use as the primary textbook in my own graduate seminar on qualitative research.

References

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