

Qualitative Organizational Research. Core Methods and Current Challenges. Gillian Symon and Catherine Cassell (eds). London, Sage 2012. 523 pp. ISBN 9780857024114

Doing qualitative research is a challenging endeavour and this is especially true for students of masters and doctoral programmes. This is partly due to the lively debates on ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies that make up the field of qualitative inquiry, which expose the diversity of positions, methods and interpretative keys characteristic of qualitative research. While attesting to the richness of the field, the nature of these debates can also be daunting for students and early researchers, dissuading them from embarking in qualitative research.

Furthermore, the emphasis upon dimensions such as evidence based, objectivity, reliability and generalisability seems to grow apace. This is reflected in the guidelines and assessment procedures used by regulatory and funding bodies to make judgements about acceptable scientific practices which, among other aspects, often favour quantitative approaches.

With this background, theoretical and practical support for students and researchers willing to engage in qualitative research is more important than ever. *Qualitative Organizational Research*, edited by Symon and Cassell, is a welcome and important contribution in this sense, as it aims to offer guidance and insights specifically on qualitative research practice. As the editors point out in the introduction, the book should be considered a companion to the editors' previous effort, *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, which provides a thorough investigation of research methods. This new collection adds contributions aiming on one hand to nurture the debate on quality criteria for qualitative inquiry, and on the other to enlighten the process of translating empirical material into "high quality output" (p. 2). In addition, the collection also aims to be a resource for doctoral, postgraduate and undergraduate students willing to embark, often for the first time, in qualitative research (*ibidem*).

Before beginning the review, I find it important to specify that my background as an organisational researcher and practitioner, although

always in the making, has been deeply shaped by the assumption that knowledge cannot be neutral, but rather is context-bound and necessarily interwoven with ethical and political considerations. This review has been developed in this perspective and it is thus inevitably shaped by my subjective position.

The book opens with an interesting introduction, in which the editors highlight key issues of current qualitative research and indicate how they are addressed by the book's different contributions. In particular, they discuss challenges related to teaching and training qualitative researchers, dealing with the growing audit culture of academia, and managing pressures towards standardisation coming from different institutional sources. Following this introduction, the book is divided into two parts: the first addresses cross-cutting issues and challenges of qualitative organizational research, and comprises of twelve chapters; the second focuses on specific research methods, and consists of fourteen chapters. Below I provide a brief summary of all the chapters in the first part, and some overall considerations on the contents of the second part. I then conclude by proposing some final reflections on the whole collection.

The first part opens with a clear, albeit somewhat sketchy, introduction to the philosophies that underpin qualitative research (Chapter Two). The chapter briefly introduces concepts such as ontology and epistemology and discusses a number of key approaches in this sense (for example positivism, interpretivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism). The chapter does not take a particular stance, striving instead to present neutral perspectives on the different approaches discussed. Indeed, the main objective of the chapter is to sensitise researchers on "the various ways in which our philosophical assumptions have influenced our research" (p. 30).

Chapter Three deals with choosing research participants, examining in particular non-probability sampling techniques. The author offers two examples from his research practice (purposive and self-selection sampling) and elaborates a number of 'guidelines for new qualitative researchers' (p. 49), pinpointing six core issues for consideration when

choosing research participants. The chapter is practice-oriented and certainly useful for those engaged in research design. A more reflexive stance on sampling procedures, concerned for instance with the researcher's responsibility in giving voice to some while necessarily silencing others, would have been an interesting addition.

Chapter Four examines various aspects of insider research, focusing especially on the relationship with research participants. Largely based on the author's experience, the chapter constitutes an engaging and reflexive account of the opportunities and dilemmas of insider research, providing plenty of stimuli for researchers to reflect on how relationships influence and are influenced by the research process.

Reflexivity is the core theme of Chapter Five. The author first provides a theoretical analysis of the concept - including tensions and limits - and then moves to explore reflexive research practices, enlightening the role of reflexivity at different levels/moments along the research project. By offering clear examples and reflections from her own experience, the author also unravels links between ontological and epistemological positions and research practice, enlightening a crucial yet too often neglected aspect of research work.

In Chapter six the focus shifts to ethical research practice and on the meaning of the word 'ethics' vis-à-vis 'science' and 'knowledge'. Drawing on Kant, the chapter highlights two core concepts: the limits of knowledge, and the intertwined nature of ethics, science and researcher's identity. On this basis, the author calls for researchers to be self-aware of their interests and status and to continuously "learn which actions are appropriate, when and where, and for what reasons, without presuming there is a right or wrong answer" (p. 102). The chapter ends with a list of nine virtues/suggestions for research practice. Surprisingly, the chapter does not make any reference to the controversial yet increasingly important regulations on research ethics, one of the four key concerns that are said to underpin the whole collection (see p. 6-7).

Chapter Seven covers 'computer assisted qualitative data analysis software' (CAQDAS). The authors' main argument is that the qualitative analysis software enhances trustworthiness and the "credibility of the research through systematisation and record keeping" (p. 126). Despite

the examples provided, which draw from research by one of the authors, the chapter is sometimes difficult to follow, especially for those unfamiliar with NVivo. In addition to this, the equation formalisation=rigour seems to underpin the authors' main argument. There are controversial and contested perspectives around this in the field of qualitative social and organisational research, however (see for instance Denzin, Lincoln et al. 2006): engaging with such debates and addressing critiques to formalisation and standardisation of qualitative inquiry would have rendered the authors' arguments stronger, in my view.

Chapter Eight addresses the practice of combining qualitative methods. This is another interesting chapter that integrates theoretical analysis and descriptive insights very well. The author often stresses the importance for researchers to be flexible and attuned with the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry; such sensitivity can often lead to mixed-methods approaches, sometimes as a planned decision, other times as results of the challenges encountered.

The main topic of Chapter Nine is longitudinal analysis. Drawing on two research projects conducted by the authors, the chapter explores two large-scale organisational case studies evolving over several years. The chapter ably describes real-time, emergent and open-ended research processes, which can be relevant however also for researching small organisations and/or for short periods of time.

International and intercultural context is the focus of Chapter Ten. In this chapter, the authors aim to explore the topic by "highlighting the complex play of power, identity and language, and drawing attention to the importance of reflexivity" (p. 169). However, the chapter fails to achieve this objective, mainly because of a certain lack of clarity regarding concepts such as power, identity and language, the meaning of which is either taken for granted, considered transparent, or both. The discussion of postcolonial approaches is also wanting, especially when accompanied by the aim "not to offer a critical analysis", for example regarding the differential treatments received in India by a researcher of the "developed world [...] perceived as being powerful or seen as having an higher status" (p. 180). More generally, the chapter offers some interesting insights from the authors' research experience. The value of these insights would have

been greatly enhanced by a stronger reflexive stance and theoretical engagement in the chapter – failing which the risk is that of perpetuating binary thinking and westocentric perspectives also in international and intercultural management (Fougère and Moulettes 2011, Kwek 2003).

Chapter Ten focuses on the challenges of publishing qualitative research. In it, the authors highlight the preference of mainstream management journals for quantitative, deductive research (especially North American journals), and explore five key strategies utilised by qualitative researchers to have their work published. In the concluding section, the authors seem to advocate for a middle ground between European and North American approaches, whereby the latter should increase their openness towards emergent qualitative approaches, and the former should “heed the call for rigour and detail in data analysis”, with the aim of “validating, standardizing and mainstreaming new and emerging qualitative methods” (p. 200). I wonder whether this suggestion can effectively contribute to the flourishing of variety in qualitative inquiry, a goal cherished by the authors. Increased standardisation may in fact limit, rather than enhance, the potential and distinctiveness of qualitative research, while reinforcing the supremacy of values and criteria belonging to the positivist tradition. However, this is certainly an interesting theme for further reflexion. The following chapter (Chapter Eleven) is another contribution by the editors, covering the controversial issue of qualitative research assessment. The chapter explores different approaches quality assessment (e.g. universal versus contingent assessment criteria) and presents the findings of research carried out by the authors and other colleagues on experts’ perceptions of the state of qualitative research, and the explicit and implicit criteria they used to make judgments and assessments. Like Chapter Two, this is another chapter in which the authors do not take a stance regarding the different approaches presented; however, they also argue that it is crucial for researchers to be “quite *explicit* about where we stand in the assessment criteria debate and on what basis we think our work should be judged – perhaps explicitly demonstrating how we have fulfilled the particular goals we set ourselves as qualitative researcher” (p. 221, italics in original). In this respect, it would have been pedagogically enlightening if the authors had done the

same for the research they present in the chapter, thus demonstrating in-vivo the value of such advice.

The last chapter of Part I (Chapter Thirteen) deals with teaching qualitative research in business schools. It presents an approach tested in a UK university by the authors, describing the underpinning philosophy, the teaching methods and the activities proposed to the students. The chapter has a strong pragmatic orientation and provides interesting hints for other lecturers engaged in similar tasks.

As mentioned above, Part Two then explores specific qualitative methods. With fourteen chapters covering respectively interviews, focus group, participatory visual methods, participant observation, autoethnography, ethnography, case studies, action research, documentary analysis, grounded theory, template analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. All the chapters in this section have a similar structure: they begin by introducing relevant literature, continue presenting the author's research, and conclude suggesting further reading (the latter is a common feature of the whole collection). The balance between insights from contemporary literature and practical examples from experience varies greatly across the different chapters, however: some contributions cover almost exclusively practical aspects, with minimal theoretical analysis (for example, Chapter Fifteen); others cover an extremely wide range of theoretical contributions, with minimal insights from research experience (for example Chapter Twenty-one); others yet brilliantly balance theoretical inputs with contributions from research experience (for example Chapters Fourteen, Seventeen, Nineteen, Twenty-five, Twenty-six and Twenty-seven). Another dimension that varies across the chapters is the space dedicated to data analysis, notoriously one of the most problematic aspects of qualitative research. In this respect, many chapters either do not address issues relating to data analysis, or mention them only marginally – the exceptions being the last four chapters (on template analysis, conversational analysis, discourse analysis and narrative analysis), which provide examples of how data (collected/produced accordingly a specific method) can be analysed. Amongst these, the most interesting one is perhaps the chapter on

discourse analysis and discursive research, as it explicitly and clearly indicates the framework adopted for the research presented. The extent to which the authors of the different chapters make reference to ontology, epistemology and the philosophical assumptions underpinning their research also varies greatly, in fact. A few chapters (for example Chapter Fifteen, Seventeen, Eighteen and Twenty) do not make any reference to philosophical approaches, as if methods and their deployment were not connected to ontological and epistemological considerations. The risk here is that of a mechanical and dogmatic understanding of methods, which would certainly not contribute to the flourishing of rigorous qualitative research. Other chapters (e.g. Chapter Nineteen) mention that a given method can be deployed in different manners according to philosophical principles underlying the research. Yet other chapters (for example Chapter Twenty-two, Twenty-six and Twenty-seven) explicitly and usefully address how different philosophical assumptions influence how the empirical material is collected/produced and analysed. Exemplary in this sense is Chapter Fourteen, on interviews, for its depth and clarity in addressing these important themes. In Chapter Twenty-two the author provides examples of different approaches, from positivist to critical theory, taken from his own research. In this respect, a clarification by the author regarding the process whereby and how he switches between different philosophical stances would have been useful and enlightening, especially for the students the collection aims to support.

In general, the second part of the book makes for interesting reading, and is rich with examples from the authors' practice as well as with theoretical inputs. It also is more internally consistent than the first part and the passage from one chapter to the other flows more easily.

One key critique that could be made to the collection as a whole is that through its different contributions it builds a sort of 'middle ground' stance regarding contingency and universalism in qualitative research: on one hand, it seems to value the distinctive nature of qualitative inquiry and its open-ended, emergent, processual dimensions; on the other, it attributes a high value to codification, formalisation and standardisation - as if these two orientations might complement each other and enhance the quality of

qualitative research. As a result of this stance, a number of key issues in contemporary qualitative research have been marginalised; amongst these are certainly those raised by 'old' or 'emergent' perspectives, such as feminism and postcolonialism, which have in fact relentlessly and strongly challenged the once unquestioned validity of western science and its assumed objectivity, neutrality and universality (Prasad 2003, Parpart 1995, Nyathi 2008). These voices and perspectives suggest to us that the flourishing of qualitative research does not (only) depend on the deployment of the 'right' techniques to systematise literature or empirical materials. Rather. It is likely to stem also, if not primarily, from a deep theoretical engagement with the variety of existing perspectives on one hand, and the courage and ability to stay attuned with the emergent and recalcitrant nature of the social on the other. This twofold orientation may provide, in my view, the basis for developing a distinctive, original as well as rigorous qualitative research stance and approach.

In this respect, the collection undoubtedly represents a good starting point for the development of a discussion around these and other aspects of qualitative research, in class or in other contexts – offering as it does plenty of practical examples and insights which will appeal to students and academics engaged with learning and/or teaching qualitative methods.

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