

## **Embracing the Practical, the Pragmatic, and the Personal: A Review of Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman's *Qualitative Research Practice***

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*In their 2007 book, *Qualitative Research Practice: Concise Paperback Version*, Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman have offered students, teachers, and researchers a practical guide for understanding and conducting qualitative research. In doing so, they and their chapter contributing colleagues have also taken us as readers into their insiders' worlds of being qualitative researchers, so we can benefit from their self-narratives of the "nitty-gritty of research practice." The result is an excellent text that is both pragmatic and personal. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, and Handbook**

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Sage has just released a 2007 concise paperback version of its 2004 classic "handbook" — *Qualitative Research Practice*. I placed handbook in quotations because the four editors of this fine work, Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium, and David Silverman, go to some lengths in their introduction to differentiate the focus of their work with that of other qualitative research handbooks such as the series of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To Seale et al. their work is not meant to be in competition with the more philosophical and political Denzin and Lincoln series of handbooks designed for more experienced qualitative researchers, but rather offer something more akin to a crafts book designed to help beginning qualitative researchers learn the practical skills of method contextualized in a pragmatic context of learning how to do what you need to do in the "real world."

In reading the book I can say that the editors and the impressive list of chapter authors make good on this claim to produce accounts from an insider perspective without forgetting how the work is actually accomplished. The ability of these authors to render the tacit knowledge from their collective lived experiences to produce chapters that take the readers inside the craft and present vivid and thick accounts of how the researcher thinks and acts is a remarkable accomplishment, and one which clearly differentiates this work from other "handbooks." By not going into an overly philosophical and politicized rhetorical stance, the contributors to *Qualitative Research Practice* remain focused on taking you, as the reader, through a back stage tour de force of qualitative research methods from a very practical and pragmatic perspective.

The new version of the work contains an expanded introduction by the authors, which serves as maybe the best review the book could have. Seale and colleagues carefully contextualize and differentiate their work as good qualitative researchers would do with any project they re-present. They effectively explain their aim to centralize method in the text and why they hold that a pragmatic turn in exploring the craft of

qualitative research is both necessary and largely missing from the qualitative research marketplace, especially when it comes to the aforementioned handbooks. I have to agree with this point of view especially when considering using a handbook in a graduate course. Although handbooks like Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) contain all of the important relevant topics for qualitative researchers to know and explore, the level at which they are written demands an experienced mindset to appreciate the important issues being debated, and can sometimes be beyond the appreciation of the beginning qualitative researcher. As a result, Denzin and Lincoln's handbooks are all prominently displayed on my book shelves and readily cited in the papers I write, but I usually find them absent in the courses I teach.

Sensing this concern on the part of professors and faculty to select the big handbooks as required texts, Seale et al. take a refreshingly transparent posture in marketing the book to students or to the faculty members who are hesitant to employ the services of *Qualitative Research Practice* in their classes. Their accurate depiction of the book as a "how to do" work with few "arid principles," a privileging of the "nitty-gritty of research practice," and a comfort with presenting a "multiplicity of positions" on what "counts as qualitative research" sold me on the uniqueness of the work and the applicability of the work for the doctoral courses I currently teach in qualitative research (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2007, p. 3). Moreover, when I read each chapter I was quickly convinced that the marketing rhetoric in the introduction was also an accurate depiction of the style and substance of each of the thirty-plus chapters.

In reviewing each chapter, I was struck by the authors' use of a first-person style, which helped to create a friendly, conversational atmosphere to the presentations. This preference also helped the authors to localize their claims and suggestions, being put forth in their chapters, and to exemplify for their readers such a transparent practice expected when reading the published results of a qualitative research project. The sharing of insights, re-thinking, and personal dilemmas helped to establish a context for each author's presentation of method, and also helped to bring out their human qualities, which created an inviting atmosphere in each chapter. This approach also helps to remind beginning and more experienced researchers how important the self of researchers and their varied contexts are to the successful and ethical conduct of qualitative inquiry. So, even though the editors of *Qualitative Research Practice* emphasize the practical and pragmatic virtues of their text, at its heart it is the personal accounts found in each chapter, which really make this book unique and critical for us all.

Another great quality of the book is that its chapters are both great introductions in and of themselves of the basic aspects of a methodological approach such as grounded theory and the necessary "tricks of the trade" to actually conduct the method, and they also serve as conduits to many book-length treatments by the authors of the very same subjects. For example, if you like the previously mentioned chapter on grounded theory, you can continue the conversation with Ian Dey in his 1999 book, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*, or begin your understanding of conducting research using visual methods with Sarah Pink in the textbook, and follow-up with her 2006 book *Doing Visual Ethnography*, especially if that is the direction you are going with your own research project.

In such a way the book functions much like a compilation release from a music company, which introduces you to the artists on their label, so if you like the song, then

maybe you will want to buy the CD. This sampler construction of the book would work very well for graduate students who are eagerly seeking to find a coherent fit between their research question or curiosity and a qualitative method, or for professors who want to introduce their students to as many good methods as possible so as not to limit the range of research questions students could pursue.

Along these lines, I can envision using the text in class and then also calling upon it again as a resource when doctoral students and I begin to explore the development of their dissertations. For example, if a student is contemplating studying how mediators facilitate negotiations among disputants, I can suggest the student go back to the pages of *Qualitative Research Practice* and review chapters on ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis, and if critical discourse analysis appears to be the best fit, then the student can progress on to Ruth Wodak's fine 2001 book, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, which she co-authored with Michael Meyer, in order to go into greater depth with the method.

The thirty-two chapters are presented in seven parts each with a brief introduction by the authors. Part one is "Encountering Method" and its five chapters focus on the authors' encounters of entering into a methodological stance such as conducting interviews, managing focus groups, and generating grounded theory. Part two is "Analytical Frameworks" and in its seven chapters the authors present a variety of approaches to understanding and analyzing data such as a feminist perspective, a Foucaultian framework, and a number of discourse methods. In part three, "Field Relations," we are introduced to the basic craft of ethnography and participant observation as well as the issues which make such fieldwork a challenge such as ethics, politics, and safety via its four chapters. In part four, "Context and Method," the focus of its seven chapters is on the relationship between the nature of the data being collected and the methods used to study it (i.e., the Internet, previously collected material, documents, and visual artifacts). "Quality and Credibility" is the title of part five and its five chapters examine ways in which qualitative researchers manage rigor and trustworthiness in their methods. The four chapters found in the last part, "Audiences, Applications, and International Context," cover postures and contexts for the conduct and presentation of qualitative research (i.e., to produce change as in action research, to provide evaluation, to publish the results, and to ponder the international opportunities and challenges of conducting and presenting qualitative research).

The 2007 version of the book does differ from the original work in a few ways. First it includes the new paperback-only introduction I discussed earlier in this review. Second, it is about 100 pages shorter than the 2004 edition, which means that a number of good chapters did not make it into the concise paperback edition: Paul Atkinson's "Performance and Rehearsal: The Ethnographer at the Opera," Linda Mitteness and Judith Barker's "Collaborative and Team Research," Janice Morse's "Preparing and Evaluating Qualitative Research Proposals," Martyn Hammersley's "Teaching Qualitative Method," Barbara Czarniawska's "Writing a Social Science Monograph," and Gill Ereaut's "Qualitative Market Research." Although these are fine chapters, their exclusion means the concise paperback edition is almost half the cost of the hardcover version. I think this student-friendly pricing makes the 2007 version a good buy, despite the fewer number of chapters.

I only have two negative criticisms of the book. First, phenomenology and hermeneutics seem strangely absent from the work. This may be because it sometimes seems that it is difficult to find a presentation on how to conduct a phenomenology that is low on the “arid principles” and high on the practical and pragmatic know-how, or maybe there is some other reason why these methods have been excluded from *Qualitative Research Practice*. When it comes time to think about a second edition for the book, I strongly suggest the editors add a chapter that gives phenomenology the nitty-gritty treatment which the other methods enjoy in the text. Such a chapter would be welcomed by professors and students alike who struggle to find a simple presentation of the “how to” in so many of the current guides to conducting phenomenology.

My second criticism is that in order to fit all of the material into a neat and relatively inexpensive 500-plus page package the font tends to be on the smallish size. For those readers with stronger and maybe younger eyes than mine, this production feature may not be as big an issue as it can be for more mature readers like me. Considering the bargain price, my having to wear reading glasses when utilizing this valuable text is a minor concession to my vanity and age, but the experience is also a major pleasure because the spectacles allow me to savor the practical insights and sage advice of these gifted editors and authors longer and without the strain of eyesight or of having to weigh through overly philosophical abstractions of qualitative research. To my students and me, the practical, pragmatic, and personal aspects of everyday qualitative research methods as exemplified in *Qualitative Research Practice* is what we need in order to become better qualitative researchers in the real-world.

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