

Personal, Thorough, and Accessible: A Review of Carla Willig's *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*

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*Carla Willig's (2008) second edition of *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* provides the novice researcher with a solid foundation in the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research, epistemology and how it drives qualitative research, as well as the application of six qualitative methodologies to the study of psychology. Key Words: Qualitative Research and Psychology*

Carla Willig's (2008) second edition of *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* provides the novice researcher with a solid foundation in the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research, epistemology and how it drives qualitative research, as well as the application of six qualitative methodologies to the study of psychology. Willig introduces the first chapter with a personal account of her own perspective regarding research, which has evolved from the perception of research as mechanical "recipes" (i.e., "how to apply the appropriate techniques to the subject matter") to creative "adventure" (how-can-I-find-out?). Before the book delves into the six different approaches, Willig lays the groundwork with a simplified yet thorough explanation of such theoretical concepts as epistemology, positivism, empiricism, and hypothetico-deductivism, and how these perspectives influence the way we approach research. She addresses how approaches differ with regard to their epistemological stance, reflexivity, and critical language awareness. Additionally, she looks at issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research, as well as issues of generalizability.

Next, Willig turns to practical aspects of the development of the qualitative research question and selection of the appropriate methodology. The "Choosing the 'right method'" paragraph (p. 22) is one of the most salient throughout the book. In this section, Willig instructs the reader to first identify the research question then select a method of analysis, which is appropriate to the research question. She goes on to stress that researchers should never collect data without first determining how the data will be analyzed. These pragmatic components aid the reader in understanding the concepts as they apply to the development of their own research. Other practical components include demonstrations of how to identify and cluster themes in phenomenological research, and the application of the six stages of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to an interview extract.

The selection of research methodology as "the way to the goal" is reiterated throughout the book, and in order to emphasize the importance of selecting a methodology based on the congruence between the research question and the methodology's epistemological roots, Willig addresses the following three questions for each methodology:

1. What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?
2. What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world? (i.e., ontological perspective) and
3. How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process (i.e., reflexivity)?

In ending each chapter by answering these three epistemological questions, Willig provides an excellent summation of the approach and enables the reader to practice their own consideration of these variables when determining the most appropriate approach.

Willig's book is both introductory and scholarly, and is organized in such a way that the reader is methodically guided through the basic tenets of qualitative research, principles of design, specific methodologies, and finally, practical applications of qualitative research. Also included in each chapter, is a helpful "how-to" guide for writing up the research report, specific to each approach. Given the flexibility provided to qualitative researchers in the way they write up their work, Willig provides guidance with regard to the organization and necessary components of the qualitative research report. The six approaches delineated throughout the book are: (a) Grounded Theory, (b) Phenomenology, (c) Case Study, (d) Discursive Psychology, (e) Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, and (f) Narrative Psychology/Memory Work.

Throughout each chapter, Willig provides an introduction to the approach, describes the procedures involved in data collection and analysis, and discusses both advantages and disadvantages, including limitations to using the approach. She also addresses specific epistemological difficulties, such as the use of triangulation, and generalizability in utilizing a case study approach. In addition to these constructs, she discusses ethical considerations and the value of each approach, as well as prevalence of use in the context of research in the area of psychology. Willig's organization within and among chapters facilitates understanding of the concepts as they build upon each other. Her positioning of the chapters on Discursive Psychology and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to follow such concepts as phenomenology helps the reader first understand the idea of perceptions constructing phenomena, then transition to the more complex approaches which consider the role of language in managing "stake" in social interactions and in constructing subject positions.

In the final chapter, Willig looks at how qualitative research is currently evaluated in the field and puts forth a series of criteria by which "good" qualitative research is measured. These include criteria established by both Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) and Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999), and include guidelines, which acknowledge both the scientific rigor and unique attributes of qualitative research (i.e., creativity and idiosyncrasy). These include such considerations as, the importance of fit, integration of theory, reflexivity, providing credibility checks, coherence, documentation, theoretical sampling and negative case analysis, sensitivity to negotiated realities, and transferability. Inclusion of these sets of criteria provides the student researcher a check-list by which to measure future qualitative research projects to ensure adherence to scientific value. In this chapter, Willig does an exceptional job of bringing the reader back to the basic principles of design outlined in Chapter 2, and emphasizes that a high quality research

study is one in which the objectives and the type of knowledge it set out to produce were clear. Further, the type of data collection and analysis selected clearly match the proposed objectives, and in order to evaluate the study's contribution, the epistemological basis of the research method must be apparent. Also included in this chapter is a table (Figure 2, p. 155), which places each of the six approaches on a continuum between two dichotomous epistemological positions: naïve realist and radical relativist. This provides the reader with an excellent visual depiction of the methodologies as they relate to the basic concepts of realism and relativism highlighted throughout the book.

Willig's commitment to qualitative research is readily apparent; however, in a seemingly objective fashion she is able to provide the reader with an accurate portrayal of current criticisms both within and outside the field of qualitative research. She effectively addresses challenges commonly encountered in both the data collection and data analysis process. Ethical considerations are also competently addressed throughout each chapter with regard to method (i.e., "the sensitive and ethical rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (p. 25)" in the semi-structured interview) and methodology (i.e., confidentiality issues surrounding case study research). Within each chapter, Willig includes real-world examples, which serve to reinforce and ground the material in practical application. The example included in the chapter on Grounded Theory (p. 42), "Negotiating commitment and involvement in the nurse-patient relationship" (Morse, 1992b), provided a relevant and concise application of concepts previously discussed in the chapter and also effectively demonstrated how the focus of a grounded theory study can shift dramatically over the course of a study. In places she does not include examples (i.e., Repertory Grids in case study research, p. 76), Willig provides guidance regarding where to access the information.

Willig's strength is in her style of writing, which not only allows the reader to easily grasp seemingly difficult and complex concepts; but also serves as a "how-to" guide for the novice researcher. Despite her years of experience in the field of qualitative research, her ability to relate to the needs of the student is remarkable. This was especially apparent in her chapters on Discursive Psychology and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Although her background is extensive in this particular area, she was able to effectively explain the differences between these two approaches on an introductory level, despite their inherent complexities. As a relative "beginner" in the field of qualitative research myself, at no point throughout the book did I feel the material was beyond my level of understanding. In addition, Willig stays true to the organization of the material throughout each chapter, which makes it an easily accessible reference.

Textual Features and Extras

To enhance learning of the concepts and methodological procedures, Willig's book features a series of "interactive exercises" at the end of each chapter. These exercises range from activities, which allow the reader to apply qualitative concepts (i.e., adopt a phenomenological attitude during an everyday activity) to practicing procedures used in analysis (i.e., coding a newspaper article line-by-line). She also includes three research reports written by third-year undergraduate psychology students, which serve to illustrate the application of the methods previously outlined. These examples include a series of annotations inserted by the author to highlight certain points. From a student's

perspective, I found these examples to be accessible and to effectively reinforce the application of the learned concepts.

The book's web page can be found at Open University Press McGraw-Hill Education (<http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/html/0335221157.html>). In addition, you can find more information on Carla Willig by visiting her web page located at <http://www.city.ac.uk/psychology/staff/willig.html>.

Reference

Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Open University Press.

Author Note

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