

D. Silverman, A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research

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The pluralisation of social realities has meant that there is a need to study the growing individualisation of ways of living against the backdrop of social environments. Such pluralisation requires a new understanding to the empirical study of social phenomena. The era of big narratives and grandiose theorisation is over. Local, temporal and situational positioned narratives and micro theorisation is now required to understand the processes, practices and meanings that govern social reality. Thus qualitative research, particularly within psychology, was manufactured as a need to study the subjective and constructed meanings to everyday experiences and practices as an essential tool.

‘*A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative*’ attempts to recapture the importance of conducting qualitative research. It is meant not to spoon feed the reader with the answers of how to conduct qualitative research but, to ‘reconsider the assumptions (of qualitative research) that textbooks trade-off’ (pp. x, brackets mine). The type of reader to whom this book is best suited for then is the student who wants to earn ‘favour with teachers who are bored by pre-digested, textbook answers’ (pp. x). The most common problem with qualitative research is that the majority of qualitative researchers chose to concentrate stringently on focus groups, surveys and questionnaires. This takes away the humanistic nature of qualitative research and replaces it with research that ‘manufactures the data rather than finds it within the field’ (pp. 31). The purpose of this book therefore is to engage the reader with the complexities of qualitative research by offering a critical account of its methods, methodologies, theory and practicalities.

Silverman maintains there is a need to recapture the ‘true’ nature of qualitative research. One way Silverman proclaims to do this is to use ethnography to ‘study familiar situations and events...as “anthropologically strange”’ (pp. 1). Ethnography is important because, through detailed observations, we can understand the meanings and constructions of people’s lives through a number of mediums. One type of ethnography that Silverman focuses on because of its increasing contemporary relevance is *netnography*. Netnography has changed the way we can observe and understand the social world. For example, ‘the analysis of existing online communities and other internet discourse combines options that are both naturalistic and unobtrusive – a combination that sets netnography apart from...on-person ethnographies’ (pp. 33). Silverman also places emphasis on the importance of the perceptions of individuals and argues that ‘in-depth interviews represent one of the best possible ways in which to access experiences, thoughts and opinions’ (pp. 56). Silverman notes that people’s meanings and experiences can be understood from the way they communicate. It is the description of what people say that be analysed to account for the true meanings and practices of

individual's actions. And it is the closeness qualitative research has to the 'field', which is unavailable to quantitative researchers that give it practical relevance (pp. 86).

This need to recapture the 'true' nature of qualitative research by Silverman is a welcomed debate. Silverman suggests that qualitative research should not attempt to measure the extent of behaviour or experience against the social world, which contemporary qualitative research seems to do. Instead, Silverman advocates qualitative research should 'see remarkable things in mundane settings' (pp. 6). This point is emphasised succinctly through the photography of Michael Chelbin. Chelbin's picture depicts an image of a grandfather next to a child sitting on a sofa, slumped and upset. Silverman highlights that what this photograph highlights is the 'true' nature of qualitative research – to look for meanings within everyday accounts of social reality – through questions such as '...even though she is not happy to see her relative, should not she be pleased to be dressed up in this way?' (pp. 26, brackets mine). So, although by qualitative research looking at mundane incidents in such a way provides us with little answers about the social world, what it does do is ponder the meanings constructed out of every day (routine) practices and the ways these represent a detailed account of the social world.

Today we live a world where there is no essence and instead we are shifting between different social realities, each constructing different identities upon the individual which, in turn, is governed by the space/place and situation that the individual occupies – this is what Silverman calls a 'Postmodern world'. Silverman suggests then, that qualitative research should recognise the value of studying the lived, subjective experience of individuals that are less focused on statistical generalizability and more focused on metaphorical confirmability through using alternative methods such as poetry. This however raises two problems with Silverman's book. Silverman recognises that we are living in a world that is fast, disposable and rooted in fluidity (something which I agree with) but adheres to this terminology of 'Postmodern'. However, what I feel Silverman is referring to is what Anthony Giddens regarded as 'late-modernity'. This conceptualisation that individuals and social structure are in a relationship with each other, and it is the repetition of the acts of individuals which reproduces structure. Secondly, Silverman maintains that with increased fluidity of social identity we must reconsider the methods we use to conduct qualitative research. However, if social reality is truly considered constructed then, is not the use of ethnography and semi-structured interviews imperative. Through ethnography we can observe the way spatial environments can place meaning upon individuals and through semi-structured interviews we can provide a deeper analysis about how individuals give meaning to their spatial environments. And, it is only through the conjunctive use of these methods we can achieve a true constructed account of the social world.

Another criticism is that Silverman shows little to no engagement with wider theoretical frames of social research in an attempt to position his theoretical perspective or that of qualitative research generally. Silverman provides a detailed discussion on the importance of postmodernism as a qualitative research theoretical perspective and outlines criticisms against the use of certain conventions such as the overuse of academic verbiage. However, Silverman does not acknowledge the importance of the theoretical frameworks to research; for instance,

there is no discussion on epistemological and ontological perspectives and the ways these cement our understanding of conducting qualitative research as well as techniques that could guide the reader and increase the accessibility of social research theory. Nevertheless, the fact that Silverman does not engage into a discussion about theoretical frameworks of social research is, in a certain sense, understandable. Identifying and establishing the imperativeness of theoretical perspectives in social research is a complex and formidable task, even to the seasoned academic. Thus, the lack of discussion on such issues can be seen as a conscious effort to make this book as methodologically imaginative and practically understandable in doing and carrying out qualitative research – by focusing on methodology and methods – that it comes accessible to the audience to which this book is intended – postgraduate students engaged on a social research methods course.