

BOOK REVIEW

The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd edn. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds). Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005. 1210 pp. ISBN 0-7619-2757-3. Price: 130.00 USD, cloth.

Responding to criticisms of qualitative research: How shall quality be enhanced?

The authors identify and discuss weaknesses in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b): unwieldy framework; too much emphasis on postmodernism and political correctness, and not enough information on how to do qualitative research; lengthiness and poor readability; biased coverage and lack of awareness of Asian scholarship; antiscience and antireason. Quality may be restored to qualitative research only when these issues are adequately addressed.

Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, and Silverman (2004) have made a serious indictment: Too often the approach valued by qualitative researchers produces 'low quality qualitative research and research results that are quite stereotypical and close to common sense' (p. 2). If so, how do qualitative researchers respond, identify problems, and safeguard quality control in qualitative research? To answer this question, it is essential to review *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b), because it is widely regarded as an authoritative, comprehensive text in the field.

Failure to address criticisms of earlier editions

The editors of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. xiii) have made the reviewers' task easy by providing a catalogue of criticisms of its two earlier editions. Included among these criticisms are, first, 'The *Handbook's* framework was unwieldy.' This is not entirely the fault of the editors. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) admit, 'An embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research. Researchers have never before had so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, and methods of analysis to draw upon and utilize' (p. 20). This embarrassment is predictable, given that qualitative research is 'endlessly creative and interpretive' (p. 26) – in the absence of commonly accepted, self-corrective standards that constrain interpretations or constructions. The

excesses of foundationlessness, anything-goes romanticism (under the pretext of constructivism and interpretivism), coupled with an antiscientific stance (under the pretext of antipositivism) can lead to disregard for rigor and scholarship; ultimately, quality suffers.

Second, 'there was too much emphasis on the postmodern period' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. xiii). Here, we must ask what lies beyond the postmodern period. Terms like 'postpoststructuralism, postpostmodernism, postpost-experimentalism' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 26) sound perseverative. They do not offer promise to those who yearn for an end to the age of 'isms' that have plagued social science. Postmodern notions such as reflexivity do not necessarily negate positivism. Rather, they challenge positivism to be more aware that researchers' values and epistemological assumptions influence their research activities (e.g. execution, interpretation, reporting). This may sound sacrilegious to entrenched postmodernists. From a dialectical perspective, however, we anticipate a synthesis of opposing views, leading to a higher level of understanding. As Ho (2000) states, the history of science is a history of dialectical thought.

Third, the editors 'gave too much attention to political correctness, and not enough to knowledge for its own sake' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. xiii). In the latest edition, Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) continue to view resistances to qualitative studies in terms of 'the politics embedded in this field of discourse' (p. 8). We think otherwise. The resistances are directed, not at qualitative research per se, but at qualitative studies that show little regard for quality control, make pretentious but unsubstantiated claims, and contribute little to advancement in knowledge or social justice. The *Handbook* as a whole conflates methodological issues with those of social justice.

Fourth, there was 'not enough on how to do qualitative research' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. xiii). This is a serious criticism, with which we agree. We examine in particular Part IV of the *Handbook*, which covers practices and methods of collecting and analyzing empirical materials that 'qualitative researchers-as-methodological bricoleurs now employ' (p. 641). The editors presume that bricoleurs 'should have a working familiarity with each of methods. . . This familiarity includes understanding the history of each method and technique as well as possessing hands-on experience with each' (p. 649). Such familiarity can hardly be presumed for the majority of the *Handbook's* readers. Besides, the path from paradigms and perspectives to methods is beset with controversy; it is open to various interpretations or constructions. In chapter after chapter,

authors discuss theoretical issues of methodology, but tend to shy from offering clear, concrete direction on practice. Students or even seasoned researchers pressed for developing a research proposal would not find the *Handbook* helpful or user friendly.

Take postmodern interviewing as an illustration. Because postmodernism figures prominently in the *Handbook*, postmodern interviewing should be a method of central interest. Fontana and Frey (2005) voice concerns about the ways in which the researcher influences the conduct of study, in both data collection and reporting of findings. (Here, as elsewhere in the *Handbook*, what is not acknowledged is that these concerns are by no means specific to postmodern researchers, but are as old as social science itself.) They offer this advice:

Interpretive interactionism follows in the footsteps of creative and polyphonic interviewing, but borrowing from James Joyce, it adds a new element – that of epiphanies, which Denzin (1989a) described as ‘those interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives [and] have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person’ (p. 709).

The word *interactionism* leads the reader to think of interaction between interviewer and interviewee. If so, interpretive interactionism may run counter to the goal of ‘conducting interviews in the hope of minimizing, if not eliminating, the interviewer’s influence [on the interviewee]’ (p. 709). Even after careful reading, inexperienced researchers would still be at a loss on how to conduct postmodern interviewing.

Poor quality of writing

Unfortunately, we find little evidence that the latest edition has benefited from these criticisms. To these we must add several more. The book is far too big: Many chapters may be reduced in length, say, by half, without loss of substance; citations of tangential relevance should be eliminated. The quality of writing leaves much to be desired. Problematic or ungrammatical sentences abound: An example, ‘We write as well-educated and influenced by ethnographers who have written powerful “oscillating” works’ (Fine & Weis, 2005, p. 65). Verbosity often gets in the way of readability. The profuse use of jargon serves a pedantic, rather than a scholarly, purpose. Common sense ideas are often couched in arcane, abstruse, grandiose constructs. The reader is unnecessarily taxed to the limit in trying to make sense of the writing. To illustrate, we select this sentence, ‘Truth is internally related to meaning in a pragmatic way through normative referenced claims, intersubjective referenced claims, subjective referenced claims, and the way we deictically ground or anchor meaning in our daily lives’

(Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 327). We conducted a minisurvey by sending the sentence to graduate students with a background in health or social science, and asked them to tell us what they thought it meant. Of the 15 who responded, eight stated they simply had no idea what it meant at all. Of course, we make no claim that the sentence is representative of the entire volume. Our complaints about writing quality apply also to other academic publications in social science. We do claim, however, that the editors should have paid greater attention to comprehensibility and readability.

Lacunae of coverage and Eurocentrism

Despite its size, the *Handbook* shows lacunae of coverage. In the Subject Index, ‘psychology’ appears only once (in connection with narrative inquiry); so does ‘social psychology’. Among contributors, only one psychologist may be identified; she and her coauthor write ‘like the artist’ (Fine & Weis, 2005, p. 65), not the psychologist. Nowhere to be seen, almost, are the contributions of psychology in general and social psychology in particular. This is a symptom that the divide between ‘psychological’ and ‘sociological’ social psychology, which we deplore, may have entrenched.

The *Handbook* shows a lack of awareness of Asian scholarship. There was a dearth of reference to the Asian literature (not the same as the Asian-American). The treatment of indigenization is incomplete. It makes no mention of the works of well-known Asian scholars, such as Yang Kuo Shu, Virgilio Enriquez, Uichol Kim, Durganand Sinha, and others. This raises the question of disingenuousness among contributors to the *Handbook* who proclaim their opposition to Euro-American hegemony and solidarity with the developing world. Asian social psychologists, besides being put off by its Eurocentrism, would find the volume mostly irrelevant to their interests.

Antiscience and antireason

Antiscience and antireason are explicit among chapter contributors. Expounding critical qualitative research, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) state that bricoleurs avoid ‘modes of reasoning that come from certified processes of logical analysis’ (p. 317). Citing various authors, Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) single out the scientifically based research movement for attack: ‘Experimental, evidence-based methodologies represent a *racialized, masculinist* [italics added] backlash to the proliferation of qualitative inquiry’ (p. 9); ‘The movement endorses a *narrow* [italics added] view of science (Maxwell, 2004) . . . “*dogmatic* [italics added] adherence to an exclusive reliance on quantitative methods” (Howe, 2004, p. 42). The movement represents ‘nostalgia

for a simple and ordered universe of science that never was' (Popkewitz, 2004, p. 62)' (p. 9). It is ironic to witness the unreflexive authority with which such assertions are made. Other emotive, accusative statements dot the volume. As Willig (2001) observes, 'When the label [positivism] is used in contemporary epistemological debates, it usually constitutes an insult' (p. 3). Too often, arguments against positive science commit the strawman fallacy, or are based on erroneous understandings of what it is.

Closely allied with such antiscience is the tendentiousness against quantification, even measurement. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) reiterate their basic position and continue to speak of 'qualitative versus quantitative research' as though they were dichotomous:

The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. . . In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim that their work is done within a value-free framework. (p. 10)

To dichotomize the qualitative and the quantitative in this way is misleading. Quantitative studies may be only descriptive, with no claim to inferential or causal analysis. Not all proponents of quantitative studies claim that their work is value free. We are simply astounded at why such misleading statements still find their way in the third edition.

Another issue closely allied with antiscience concerns hypothesis testing, which signifies a milestone toward methodological maturity. Not surprisingly, opposition to it comes from theorists of critical theory, constructivist, poststructural, and postmodern schools of thought. The *Handbook* authors seem to believe that qualitative research is confined to the exploratory phase of investigation. They show no awareness that, when sufficient knowledge is accumulated for theoretical construction and hypothesis testing, qualitative research may become hypothetical-deductive (see Ho, Ho, & Ng, 2006; for a discussion).

Conclusion

Qualitative research, as presented in the *Handbook*, appears to thrive on perpetual crisis, of legitimation, of praxis, and

of representation. There is an abundance of theorists, but a dearth of practitioners; a preponderance of assertions, but little evidence or rational argument in support of them. Reading the *Handbook* may result in more knowledge about theories of qualitative research – without a corresponding increase of knowledge about people or society. Writers and poets do not have to be bedevilled by theories of literary criticism. Perhaps qualitative researchers may be better off without the *Handbook*? Only when we confront the issues raised in the present review can quality be restored to qualitative research.

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