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Qualitative Methods in Business Research

Päivi Eriksson and Anne Kovalainen

Sage

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For a student or practitioner beginning their qualitative research journey in business, there are few dedicated texts. Business schools have tended to recommend the routinely revised and increasingly bulky general methods 'standards'; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (e.g. 2009; 2012; 2016) and Bryman and Bell (e.g. 2007; 2011; 2015). The orientation of these texts towards the student dissertation and research modules has produced a relatively limited view of qualitative research methods and what they can do to address business and organisational problems. Admittedly, the most recent updates reflect a growing emphasis on qualitative research and include designs such as ethnography, as well as analytical methods such as narrative, discourse and rhetorical analyses. But perhaps the menu in these standard texts is more about catering to a mass market of MBA students across a broad syllabus, in contrast to the reader who has already made the decision to follow a qualitative route.

Thus, the arrival in 2008 of the first edition of Eriksson and Kovalainen's *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* was a fresh, different and welcome complement to the standard texts. Topics familiar to the social sciences literature: action research, narrative research, discourse analysis, feminist research and critical research were, at the time, generally outside the scope of interest of business and management.

An expanded, second edition of *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*, targeted at a global market, indicates increasing acceptance of a broader range of qualitative approaches, even though competitor specialist titles are still fairly sparse. One such title is Myers' (2009; 2013) *Qualitative Research in Business and Management*. By comparison, Myers is a more advanced text which discusses philosophical underpinnings and provides a clear critique of each method. Significantly, Myers confidently advocates qualitative research design as a stand-alone approach, citing and detailing studies from top-ranked journals throughout as proof of the quality of scholarship that can be achieved.

Eriksson's and Kovalainen's credentials as 'critical and reflexive business researchers' (2016, p. 3) and teachers of qualitative business methods in Finnish universities over 25 years underscore their student-focused, introductory handbook. In common with Myers, these authors also champion stand-alone qualitative design, defending it as 'an adequate method of knowledge production, without any link to quantitative research' (p. 5), thus challenging the dominant business approach of using qualitative research merely as a complementary method; often employed as a first phase in

research, or to interrogate issues that require clarification in quantitative studies.

In the introductory pages, the book's main purpose (also its main appeal at first glance) is acknowledged: to give an 'overview on some approaches that have not gained wide popularity among business researchers as yet'. Eriksson and Kovalainen's project, then, while covering what they classify as the more popular qualitative business methods such as 'case studies, ethnographic research, action research, focus group research and grounded theory' (p. 7) is to invite the reader to consider the less popular methods such as 'narrative and discursive research, as well as critical, feminist and visual research' due to a growing interest in these approaches. We could dispute, perhaps, to what extent action research (AR) *is* a popular qualitative business method in the UK, since AR is absent from the two widely-used business methods texts cited earlier in this review. However, given that AR is fairly well documented in other, *management* research texts (e.g. Gill and Johnson, 2010; Easterby-Smith et al, 2015; 2012; 2008) perhaps it is a matter of emphasis and knowing where to look.

The book's 376 pages are structured in a conventional manner, sequencing the preparatory thinking and decisions required for most research projects: philosophical issues; research design and process; research questions and literature review; access and relationships; and ethics. These five topics comprise the chapters in Part 1, while Parts II and III deal with the nature of qualitative data and research designs or 'approaches'. Part IV covers writing up research, evaluation of research quality, and publishing.

The chapter on action research runs to 16 pages and covers much the same ground as the first edition: from definitions, origins and types of AR, through to designing, implementing, writing and evaluating the AR project. The origins of AR are briefly traced to the work of Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), among other early social scientists including the sociologist William Foote Whyte (1914-2000) and the work of the Tavistock Institute. Reflecting the authors' Finnish roots, Scandinavian industrial democracy research also receives a mention. The authors argue that AR in principle 'advocates for active participation and improvement of social situations and problems, as well as empowering 'individuals and groups of people' in 'reciprocal activity'.

Further, they argue, AR is not 'technically a research "method"; rather it should be understood and addressed as an approach to such research that requires involvement, a close relationship to the research object and participation as key starting points for research activities...' (p. 168). Here, the authors raise an important point: it seems clear that AR without a guiding philosophy could be *labelled* action research yet only pay lip service to some aspects of the process. However, when linked to a particular framework such as feminist or critical research ('emancipatory' research, as the authors put it) there are implications for the objectives/outcomes set at the beginning of the project and the level of participation/involvement desired with the client organisation, group or community. For example, the authors comment that it is less usual in business for the client organisation to participate in analysing data collectively, although one could argue that there may be benefits in adopting this approach where a business needs to increase its performance in

employee involvement or engagement, or engagement with another group, such as the local community.

Therefore, when describing the types of action research approaches available, the authors highlight the level of group/community/organisation participation as a key point of difference between approaches. Furthermore, *Action learning* is cited as 'closely related to community-engaged learning activity within the action research tradition'; often undertaken in managerial settings and based on participant perceptions rather than 'systematic data collection' (p. 169).

Several philosophical, ethical and practical issues associated with AR are raised throughout the chapter. For example, at the start, the reader, a hypothetical PhD researcher (rather than a practitioner), is directly presented with a scenario, in which they as researcher are employed as an HRM project assistant working in a medium-sized business-to-business company. This scenario immediately raises the question of whether it is possible to combine the roles of researcher and employee in an AR project. Using this scenario throughout, the authors raise further questions concerning access to an organisation for AR purposes, who defines the problem within the organisation as well as the importance of drawing a line between action research and consultancy. Furthermore, the authors argue that action research is not an easy option as it is likely to be complex, subject to shifting priorities within the client organisation and reliant on the researcher's confidence, social skills and ability to gain trust, as much as their research knowledge, all of which are sound observations.

And yet aside from minor revisions and updated references, it would appear that little has changed in this chapter in the eight years between editions, suggesting that AR is neither a strength nor an area of special interest to the authors, when compared, for example, to the chapter on ethnographic research which has received a re-working of structure and content. Interestingly, the authors note that the diversity of approaches in action research means that it is sometimes very close to ethnography and that 'sometimes the distinction between the two is even rather artificial' (p. 169).

While the authors personalise the chapter by addressing the hypothetical PhD researcher, the focus is more on the 'prescription' for undertaking the project than the tricky job of balancing a client research project with academic objectives. A reflexively-written 'tale from the field' could have added a more realistic edge to communicate how it feels, as a researcher, to face some of the ethical and practical dilemmas when immersed in a project. Myers' (2013) AR chapter, by contrast, debates these issues (particularly the researcher/consultant divide), as well as the thorny point of how knowledge produced by action research can be seen as valuable to the academic community, for example, emphasising that the PhD researcher should present their work at conferences and gain feedback from scholars early on in the process.

Several other aspects of the Eriksson and Kovalainen's book are worthy of note: the contemporary design of the book is an improvement on the first edition, with clearer formatting and typography. In line with conventional methods texts, each chapter is divided into sub-sections and is punctuated with shaded areas of text that highlight key principles, problems and

typologies. There are end-of-chapter summaries, further reading and exercises as well as a handy glossary at the back of the book.

My main criticism is that while the authors claim to present 'real world examples' and, as I've mentioned, draw on realistic scenarios, walking the reader through a particular approach, they could do more to bring their teachings to life through connecting with business problems and cases. It would be good to see, for example, synopses of real research projects in order to understand typical research questions associated with a particular method. Telling a 'rich' story of how a specific business problem was interpreted or understood using qualitative research would strengthen the pedagogy of the book, giving the reader more tangible illustrations to refer to. It would also help position this otherwise intrepid introductory text as an important contribution to the business research methods canon.

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