Book Review


This book provides invaluable direction and advice for all researchers, whether experts or graduate students, who are preparing for, planning, studying or just thinking about qualitative research. The book’s focus is on the practical; encouraging the reader to learn about how qualitative research works before going out to do it.

Stake, in his 12 chapters, covers many of the same issues introduced in qualitative research texts (e.g. Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). Chapters 2 to 8 cover issues such as the person as instrument, experimental understanding, stating the research problem, research methods, the review of the literature, and research evidence, analysis, and synthesis. Also introduced are topics that are less frequently discussed in the literature, namely, storytelling, advocacy and ethics.

The “Introduction: Make Yourself Comfortable”, does exactly that as Stake introduces himself, creating a welcoming sense of personalization. The chapter continues with the outline of 18 projects that can be completed during a qualitative research course. The breadth of these projects immediately introduces the reader to the variety of practices of qualitative research: formal or informal, large or small, individual or collaborative. Throughout the remainder of the book, each chapter includes practical examples of methods, boxed vignettes, and learning projects to stimulate critical thinking and self-reflection.

Stake concludes the introductory chapters poignantly with the “essence of the qualitative approach”. He states his view that, “qualitative research has moved social research away from an emphasis on cause-and-effect explanation and toward personal interpretation” (p. 31). Typically, it is argued that researchers conclude that one thing causes another to happen; yet that may not be true. Thus, Stake asks researchers to reduce causal language and replace it with description.

Emphasizing that the understanding of qualitative research needs to embrace multiple realities, the middle of the book begins to describe the methodology of qualitative research in detail. In Chapter 4, “Stating the Problem; Questioning How this Thing Works”, the challenge of writing the research question and how to design the study is introduced. In a single table (p. 76), Stake defines and explains his “six levels of research questions”. Knowing what is involved in developing a good research question can often be difficult for beginning researchers to understand. Yet, via a table and an excellent example the reader is guided through the process of formulating the
research question(s). Similarly, in the methods and gathering data chapter (Chapter 5), Stake examines four separate data-gathering methods: observing, interviewing, exhibit questions, and surveys. Following his practical approach, each method is introduced and examined through examples and the researcher, himself/herself, is emphasized as the most important instrument in the research.

In Chapter 6, “Review of Literature”, Stake differentiates between a systematic literature review and a conceptual literature review. Concept mapping is identified as an essential step in developing any literature review since many reviews often fail to include “relevant research literature in other disciplines” and concept mapping is shown to assist researchers to avoid this oversight. Stake’s continued explanation of “how things work” is continued in “analysis (the taking things apart) and synthesis (the putting things together)” (p. 133). Through example, Stake furthers the discussion by illustrating how the researcher gathers data, increases his/her experience, analyses the patches of data, puts the parts back together, and synthesizes the results.

In the final chapters, Stake introduces storytelling, where he introduces the blueprint for researchers to craft a story from the data, specifically, showing how the observations, interviews, and documents construct the story researchers produce for others to read and consider; writing the report, where he takes the reader from outline to final product, emphasizing the duality, as he has throughout the book, to employ the “converging dialectic” of the final product; and finally, advocacy and ethics where he encourages researchers to reflect on the importance of the portrayal of their research. He reminds us that as researchers we need to take heed that we are invading others’ lives, breaching their privacy, and then telling the story of their private lives. In his concerns over the discussion of one of his own projects in the book, it is apparent that Stake considers all researchers to be advocates who need to reach out with more than just care and respect for study participants.

As I turned more and more pages of this book, I found myself entering Dr. Stake’s classroom. His experience and knowledge is shown through his warm and inviting style of writing which is clear, concise and yet not overly simplified. A testament to his writing is the fact that as I read this book, I felt it was written specifically for me as a PhD student, yet I recognize that any researcher who reads the book will feel it is written specifically for his/her situation.

This is an excellent source for all researchers, whether beginning graduate students or experts in the field. This book ranges from how to think about qualitative research to a guide for future reference into more complex qualitative research methods and strategies. Advanced students and scholars will benefit from the clear articulation of the finer points of qualitative research and inquiry as well as the reference to and description of the duality of research.

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