

5E

INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA

DAVID SILVERMAN

companion
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INTERPRETING QUALITATIVE DATA



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DEDICATION

For my friends at the Nursery End in the hope (but not the expectation) that Middlesex will finally achieve success in English cricket's county championship

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COMPANION WEBSITE

Be sure to visit the companion website to this book at <https://study.sagepub.com/silvermaniqd5e> to find a range of teaching and learning materials for both lecturers and students, including the following:

- **Methodspace page:** link to a Methodspace group for the book (www.methodspace.com/group/silverman) where readers can give feedback, discuss issues and pose questions about their research directly to the author.
- **Additional case studies and examples:** engaging and relevant case studies to help illustrate the main concepts in each chapter.
- **Full-text journal articles:** full access to selected SAGE journal articles related to each chapter, providing students with a deeper understanding of key topics.
- **Links to useful websites, podcasts and YouTube videos:** an assortment of direct links to relevant websites for each chapter.
- **Student exercises:** thought-provoking questions for each chapter that are intended to help students think critically about their own research.
- **Model answers:** to exercises found in this book.
- **Helpful tips:** valuable considerations for students doing their own research.
- **Recommended reading:** suggestions for further reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Silverman trained as a sociologist at the London School of Economics and the University of California, Los Angeles. He taught for 32 years at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is now Emeritus Professor at the Sociology Department. He is interested in conversation and discourse analysis and he has researched medical consultations and HIV-test counselling.

He is the author of *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (fourth edition, 2012), *Doing Qualitative Research* (fourth edition, 2013) and *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (second edition, 2013). He is the editor of *Qualitative Research* (third edition, 2011) and the Sage series *Introducing Qualitative Methods*. In recent years, he has offered short, hands-on workshops in qualitative research for universities in Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia. He is a Visiting Professor at the Business School, University of Technology, Sydney.

Now retired from full-time work, he aims to watch 100 days of cricket a year. He also enjoys voluntary work in an old people's home where he sings with residents with dementia and strokes.

PREFACE TO FIFTH EDITION

This new edition has been substantially rewritten. Drawing upon comments from readers of the fourth edition, I have made the following changes:

- A new chapter on generalising from case study research which addresses the perennial issue of 'How many cases do you need?'
- The organisation of the book is simplified: there are now only three sections and discussion of how to make qualitative research credible is moved to an earlier position, immediately after the chapter on case study research.
- Throughout the book, consistent use is made of two qualitative research models: naturalism and constructionism. This is in line with current usage and, I believe, makes the book easier for students to follow.
- Many more recent case study examples drawn from a broad range of disciplines including business, education, social work and geography as well as health studies.
- Greater attention to research based on Internet data including 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010).
- Chapter 1 has a new introduction outlining the meaning of 'research'.
- Chapter 2 now includes a discussion of mixed methods.
- Chapter 6 has an expanded discussion of the ethics of Internet research and Chapter 9 a new section on netnography.
- Chapter 10 has new sections on organisational documents (including a discussion of corporate social responsibility) and on documents of everyday life (e.g. blogs and diaries).
- Chapter 13 now makes it clear that writing a research report should not be a linear process.
- Chapters 14 and 15 are illustrated with case examples from a wider range of disciplines.
- Where the number of an exercise appears in red, the book's website includes a model answer.
- For ease of access, all links provided in this book now appear in the website. All links listed in this book were checked in early 2014.

My aim has been to develop the book further as an undergraduate introductory qualitative methods text which complements the postgraduate focus of *Doing Qualitative Research*. Rather than attempting to turn this volume into simply an undergraduate research project book, my focus is on introducing first-degree students to the theory, methods and practice of qualitative research. In this way, I have tried to make this book suitable for both taught courses and research projects at the undergraduate level.

Like the fourth edition, this volume offers a companion website with additional case studies provided by links to Sage journals. It also provides links to useful websites,

podcasts and YouTube videos. This fifth edition is also accompanied with its own group page on www.methodspace.com where users can give feedback and discuss research-related topics.

Like earlier editions of this book, I aim to demonstrate that qualitative research is not simply a set of techniques to be slotted into any given research problem. That is why this book concentrates on data analysis rather than simply data gathering. Indeed, at the very start of qualitative research, analytic issues should be to the fore.

Contrary to the common tendency simply to select any given social problem as one's focus, I try to demonstrate that research problems, at any level, need to be analytically defined. Indeed, in qualitative research, it often makes sense to begin *without* a clearly defined problem and to gradually work towards a topic by confronting data with the simple question: 'What is going on here?' Here, as elsewhere, my position derives from a *constructionist* stance in which my preference is to gather naturalistic data in order to study how people put their world together in everyday situations. This involves:

- studying what people do (i.e. their behaviour) rather than focusing upon their thoughts and perceptions
- a concern with what is taken for granted in everyday life, finding extraordinary features in apparently ordinary activities and noting the ordinary organisation of apparently extraordinary events (see Silverman, 2013b and Chapter 1)
- a preference for naturalistic data (e.g. observations, documents, audios and videos)
- a concern with the sequences in which behaviour is embedded
- an attention to context and a refusal to triangulate data gathered in different ways
- contributing to practice often by revealing the potential of unnoticed participant skills.

You should be aware that this is a minority position within the qualitative research community. Most qualitative research is based on what I call a *naturalistic* model (see Chapter 1). This involves:

- studying what people think or feel (i.e. their 'experiences')
- a preference for interviews and other kinds of manufactured data
- using methods of analysis which pay little attention to sequential organisation (e.g. content analysis or thematic analysis)
- a willingness to triangulate data from different contexts

In brief, for me, this majority position has many faults:

- Its focus on 'experience' more or less replicates the predominant focus of contemporary Western cultures (i.e. it is the arena of talk show hosts like Oprah Winfrey rather than a specifically social science perspective).
- Its assumption that subjective factors like beliefs, perceptions and motives shape behaviour is over-rationalistic. Most of the time we just get on with things and only worry about what they 'mean' if something out of the ordinary occurs.
- Its lack of attention to how people attend to the sequencing or positioning of actions tends to define people as 'dopes'.
- Its use of triangulation can be a form of crude *positivism*. Ironically, positivists are often in a better position to study 'meanings' than naturalists (e.g. they can study large numbers of people, use reliable measures and come up with reliable correlations).