



Doing qualitative research in times of alternative facts

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review of

Ciesielska, M. and D. Jemielniak (Eds.) (2017) *Qualitative methodologies in organization studies – volume I: Theories and new approaches*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (Kindle edition, pp. 219, £82.16, ISBN: 9783319652160).

Ciesielska, M. and D. Jemielniak (Eds.) (2018) *Qualitative methodologies in organization studies – volume II: Methods and possibilities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (Kindle edition, pp. 264, £87.40, ISBN: 9783319654416).

For a researcher, methodology is always a concern, but in times of alternative facts, post-truth and increased polarization, questions about how knowledge is produced has come to the forefront of my daily practice as researcher and teacher. Discussing methodology with students, in particular interpretations and truth, has in my experience changed character in the light of alternative facts and science being dismissed as a political commentary. The two volumes on qualitative approaches and methods edited by Malgorzata Ciesielska and Dariusz Jemielniak target both established researchers and PhD-students in organization studies and promise new takes on traditional methods, as well as, cutting-edge approaches, in contributions from active scholars doing qualitative research. So, what can these contributors add to the

current conditions of research, and how it affects our approaches and methods?

The first volume covers established theories on research paradigms, grounded theory, action research, ethnography and reflexivity, as well as newer conceptual frameworks such as the sociomateriality of storytelling and visual anthropology. In addition, a number of contributions discuss ethical aspects of the research processes from the perspective of emotions, accessibility and a changing research landscape. The second volume offers an overview of traditional methods such as case studies, interviews, observations, focus groups and discourse analysis. The volume is concluded by two chapters on how to design a qualitative research project and some dos and don'ts of the craft.

Most of the contributions in the two volumes, while giving comprehensive and insightful overviews of the methods, do not explicitly discuss those methods in relation to the current research landscape. However, some of them do and contextualize the methods in what they perceive as a new physical, virtual and interactive reality. A reoccurring theme in the two volumes is how modern means of communication and new digital technologies have changed our daily lives and research challenging our traditional methods and approaches. Slawomir Magala, for example, describes our daily life as characterized by an 'increasingly complex and unpredictable flow of interactions and communications' [52] accelerated by the mobile multi-media connectivity with an increasing visual competition for our attention. So, how should we deal with an increasingly complex social world and unpredictable flows of interaction and communication from a methodological point of view? Mustafa Özbilgin and Joana Vassilopoulou in their chapter on relational methods argue that we should not reduce the complexity of social relations and rather embrace the relational thinking in organization research and innovate methodologies 'that can trace, assess, examine and analyze the reality of relationality in social settings' [153]. They warn us of that this type of investigation focusing on the complexity could be marginalized in times of reductionism and the current publication regime.

This new social world transformed by new means of communication challenges in particular one of the most classic methodologies in qualitative research, ethnography, and its accompanying fieldwork technique, participant observation. In her chapter on shadowing, Barbara Czarniawska discusses the difficulties of performing the type of participant fieldwork advocated in traditional ethnography when investigating phenomena in contemporary societies. She argues that we are faced with the challenge of studying physical and virtual interaction taking place in different places at the same time and being largely invisible. She suggests shadowing as a more appropriate fieldwork technique than traditional participant observation to capture the life and work of people in contemporary societies characterized by larger mobility and modern means of communication. Malgorzata Ciesielska, Katarzyna W. Boström and Magnus Öhlander relate the traditional method of observation to this new reality being both real and virtual, and discuss how this complicates the definition of the field and requires methodological innovations such as multilocal, or translocal fieldwork. The issue of observing a phenomena dispersed in time and space requires a new approach to ethnography and has spawned a number of variations such as nethnography and virtual ethnographies observing interaction and communication in online forums, and subsequently, writing about these cybercultures using the classic toolbox from cultural anthropology, such as archival studies, treating the material from the online interaction as any other text.

Slawomir Magala argues that adding more visual anthropology and visual research methods to our research practice would increase our understanding of these flows and improve our sense-making of the images competing for our attention. Visual anthropology is according to Magala at the margin of legitimate academic research and challenges us because we are trained to work with the written word. However, the traditional methods of visual anthropology are also challenged by new technologies of visual communications such as blogs and Facebook accounts and need to be supplemented by narrative methodologies because we need to move away from the idea of photography as documentary and analyze the symbolic and political message of the images. Following the same reasoning, David Boje

and Nazanin Tourani address the materiality of storytelling in their chapter and argue that this is vital in our times when so many stories are told through digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat. With a point of departure in a posthumanist ontology, they argue that we need methodologies to improve our understanding of the nonhuman element and the materiality of our social world, which they mean has been neglected in the social constructionist research era. The methodological innovations in visual research methods and Internet research creates new ethical dilemmas and reframes old discussions on ethics in the research process. This aspect of the new digital technologies is discussed by Sylwia Ciuk and Dominika Latusek in their chapter on ethics in qualitative research. The digitalization affects all parts of the research process from access negotiations, collection, presentation, dissemination, to storage in databases, creating new ethical dilemmas. They discuss in relation to visual methods and observation online the question about informed consent when observing and interacting in a virtual space that is neither private nor public. My interpretation of the message in the two volumes that I just read is that we might face a new social and material world, but we got a set of methods that we have worked with, developed and reflected upon over a very long time that can be adapted further.

When reading these contributions in the light of the discussions of polarized discourse, post-truth and alternative facts I am reminded of that the community of researchers doing qualitative research is either very well prepared for these discussions, or the least suited to engage in these discussions. We have a long tradition of working within different paradigms as outlined in the first chapter of the first volume, but also of critically reflecting on our craft and on the idea of truth. So, are we prepared to engage in a discussion of 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' based on the theories and methods we have today? The fact that these volumes are introduced with a discussion of research paradigms, and the role of philosophy in our lives, and concluded by a discussion on how the design of a qualitative research project and the choice of methods can be so different because of our assumptions is perhaps telling of our craft showing how polarized we are. Our solution within our own research community has so far been at best to acknowledge that we

have different basic assumptions about the world and how to gain knowledge about it, which are incommensurable. However, our choice of research paradigm sometimes has become a morale choice intimately linked to our identity as researchers resulting in not so flattering culture wars between scientists from different paradigms that Beata Glinka and Przemysław Hensel remind us of in the second volume. The differences in our basic assumptions and methodologies make the research results within one paradigm invalid, ‘fake news’, from another paradigm’s perspective.

In view of polarized discourses, I perceive the message from these two volumes as ‘know thy paradigm’ and use appropriate methods in a reflexive and consistent way. The aim of the editors is to encourage us to be reflective practitioners and the focus is on considering our own craft in terms of methods, which is valuable and necessary, but I would argue that books on methodology also would benefit from including a discussion on how to engage in a larger discussion about research in the society and to reflect on our craft as not only a research practice, but also a societal practice in a post-truth society. A practice involving how to handle the situation when our science is incommensurable with the basic assumptions, emotions and social norms of many people outside of our research community. In the face of changing social worlds, cultural realities, and research landscapes to be a reflective practitioner also involves understanding that more scientific facts will not necessarily convert people. This insight that social norms controls how scientific results are understood and received has been highlighted before in relation to sustainability by Klintman (2013), but should also be discussed as a vital aspect of doing qualitative research in times of alternative facts.

references

Klintman, M. (2013) *Citizen-consumers and evolution: Reducing environmental harm through our social motivation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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