Book Review

Simon Kawycz
(Sports Studies, Hope University, Liverpool)

David Silverman (2007)

A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research

ISBN: 9781412945967

A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research at first glance may sound like the ideal investment for a student who may be struggling financially and looking for immediate answers to their research queries. If you are looking for a book on qualitative research that is a step by step guide to developing, conducting and analysing qualitative research then this will not be the book for you. However Silverman opens by identifying how the book could be of use to a variety of individuals. With reference to use by novice researchers Silverman (2007:2) states that “…for the student who craves more than simple cookbook answers this book seeks to offer broader questions that many research texts simply gloss over”. The introduction helps the reader to identify how the book is organised and interestingly, why research methods are important to the author. This is something that is not seen in many other books of this nature. This gives the reader an insight into the author’s development as a qualitative researcher which could help the reader reflect upon their own choices and motives for conducting qualitative research.

The first chapter explores the “remarkable in the mundane”, identifying a different perspective or way of ‘seeing’ the same situation through ethnographic approaches. It also highlights the possible repercussions of our views about the world around us. To demonstrate the different approaches and styles of qualitative research Silverman gives a variety of examples of ethnography including the use of photos and extracts from novels. Silverman stresses the importance of moving past the mundane and finding the remarkable within. Asking deeper questions of the things that go on around us to find out what it really means are important issues raised within this chapter. Even at this early point in the book Silverman poses a number of questions that begin to make you ask questions of yourself and your approaches to research.

The next chapter discusses strategies for collecting data and the issues surrounding this process. Silverman looks at what he calls data found in the everyday world and how this differs from manufactured data. According to Silverman manufactured
data, coming from interviews, questionnaires and focus groups should only be used as a last resort or when a quick-fix solution is required. Students studying sport and looking to complete a qualitative piece of research should not be put off by Silverman’s comments here. Silverman’s intention is to encourage students to look beyond the traditional approaches to gathering data to inform their findings more realistically. Silverman goes on to explain and define his terms for the benefit of the reader through examples of research across many fields of study. It is important to take from this chapter that in some situations there will be a more effective approach to gathering data; natural or manufactured.

Chapter three takes the reader through the “most important process of qualitative research” - data analysis. Silverman states that “…collecting data is not even half the battle; data analysis is always the name of the game” (p.61). Silverman offers an approach to help manage and analyse your data. The examples in this chapter are varied and while not being directly related to sport do offer an indication of how the process could be adapted for deeper inquiry within sport. Those students with limited experience in handling qualitative data may find this too advanced or too complex; indeed the nature of student study and the time constraints could limit the type of analysis that could be undertaken.

Chapter four explores the notion of what the results actually mean and their application to the environment or organisation being studied. In essence Silverman looks at the problem that, even when you have conducted a well analysed piece of research, people could still ask the question “so what”? This is a question that many students could be faced with when trying to come up with research titles for projects and dissertations. What is the merit, purpose or applicability of doing a certain piece of research? Other textbooks have sections advising students on how to develop their research question. What Silverman is trying to identify for the reader is the importance and applicability of qualitative research in its many forms. These can have an impact on how we view society around us, understanding how things work and how things could be changed. It is noted by Miller, Dingwall and Murphy, 2004, (cited in Silverman, 2007:92) that one of the strengths of ethnographic research is that in situ observation can lead to the identification of previously unnoticed best practices. This could help students develop research questions that look at organisations in sport such as, team cohesion and group dynamics. Finally, in this chapter Silverman highlights the importance that writing is always for an audience, be it your tutor or fellow students. The important issue is to realise there are a number of audiences out there, who should be considered as they will be making value judgements of your work.

Chapter five takes the reader deeper into the underlying questions about qualitative research. While offering an alternative viewpoint or as Silverman puts it “an anti-bullshit agenda for qualitative research” (2007:139) he urges the researcher to re-
member factors such as clarity, reason, economy, beauty and truth in their research endeavours. This chapter includes many different examples from a variety of areas that help to illustrate the issues raised by Silverman. For a sport student this chapter may cause confusion at times, unless they have already been introduced to qualitative research and had the opportunity to practice fieldwork and reflect critically upon their findings. While this book does not follow conventional sections and headings that may be encountered in other research methods texts it does offer the student something that could add to their knowledge and understanding of qualitative research. Indeed Silverman highlights that this may not be the book to choose to dip in and out of to aid your research in a mechanistic sense. This is a book that requires you to read all chapters to gain a more comprehensive understanding of where qualitative research can help to understand the “lived experience”. However Silverman does offer in his concluding remarks a list of do’s and don’ts for completing valuable qualitative research. These are interesting and informative having been informed through his own journey and experiences as a qualitative researcher within the medical profession. For sport students this may not seem the most appropriate book to develop your research skills as a novice. However, importantly this book will help you think about your research findings and help you ask deeper questions that other books may not lead you to.

In conclusion, the examples used throughout the book highlight the key issues concerning qualitative research as Silverman sees them. They do not include any specific sporting references, however there are many interesting and pertinent issues utilised which could be applied when researching within sport and physical activity. For the experienced student researcher this book will help them reflect upon how their project developed and how other methods of qualitative inquiry could be used to gain more enriching perspectives of other’s experiences. Silverman makes an interesting point in relation to how this book should be treated urging the reader to be cautious if they are persuaded by anything they have read here. Silverman states that,

“...my aim will not have been achieved if you simply accept anything that I have written. Instead, I will be satisfied if you become a little more conscious of the implications of the sometimes unconscious choices you make on your own research path.” (p.144).

The main strength of this book is its clarity to raise awareness of the implications for carrying out qualitative research. For undergraduates I would consider this to be an important supplementary text to have at hand while referring to some more prescriptive texts to structure your work. For experienced student researchers this is an excellent text to help you raise interesting and searching questions to realise new avenues that could be followed in your qualitative research.

—Simon Kawycz