REVIEW ESSAY


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*Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer* (van den Hoonoard, 2012) provides a comprehensive introduction to qualitative research from a social constructivist, symbolic interactionism perspective. Van den Hoonoard references her previous writings and research experiences extensively as she provides context and examples for readers to draw upon while they learn new concepts and methodologies. *Qualitative Research in Action* is divided into ten chapters, and systematically goes through the process of beginning a new research project. She begins the preface of the text by locating her theoretical approach as being rooted in symbolic interactionism (p. x). The text moves into defining the differences between qualitative and quantitative work, as well as addressing the potential benefits of a mixed methods approach. Van den Hoonoard comes from a sociological perspective and presents Robert Prus’s (2005) ‘generic social processes’, which “reflect researchers’ interest in the emergent nature of human life” (p. 27). Moreover, she positions herself and *Qualitative Research in Action* as providing a uniquely Canadian perspective on qualitative research while citing Canadian qualitative studies.

Van den Hoonoard’s writing is continually accessible and casual while providing a level of ease for any beginner researcher who is nervous about starting research. *Qualitative Research in Action* is written for undergraduate and graduate students, and does not employ verbose language. The text is from a social justice perspective, and includes many methodologies that are commonly used in social justice based and participatory studies (photo elicitation, narrative analysis, and participatory action research). Van den Hoonoard advises readers to ensure they practice reflexivity and utilize the idea of sensitizing
concepts, or topics of interest to the research participant, in order to understand the perspective of the participant and subvert power imbalances. This concept is referenced throughout her works (Van den Hoonaaard, 2013), and is effective for interviewers to summarize key themes in interviews, and begin to understand the reasoning as to why these topics are of importance to the participant.

Throughout the text, van den Hoonaaard consciously draws upon sociological theories to engage in discourse around methodological approaches to qualitative research. This is apparent through references to concepts such as Becker’s (1967) ‘hierarchy of credibility,’ which expounds the belief that those who are deemed knowledgeable and powerful have their knowledges authenticated, while others with perceivably less power and knowledge live with incomplete knowledges. Comparisons between this and Foucault’s (1977) knowledge/power ideology are discernable. While van den Hoonaaard discusses power dynamics within interviews by describing discursive shifts in power between herself and interviewees, she does not use the word ‘power’ for the discursive elements that underplay interactions throughout research and society. Thus, the audience is left to a loss as to what underplays these discursive dynamics in interviews and how to acknowledge or alter such systems of power within their own research. While the acknowledgement of societal dynamics and how specific ‘truths’ or knowledges are authenticated is important, the reader must comprehend how to position herself or himself as a qualitative researcher within these discursive formations.

Within my work, I position my paradigm as a critical theorist, employing post-structuralist analyses through a Foucaultian framework. Keeping my research background and my future pursuits of critical policy analysis in mind, I was looking for the inclusion of these elements in van den Hoonaaard’s text. Disappointingly, I noticed a lacking of critical perspectives as well as critical race theories. On an ontological and epistemological level, there was an erasure of racialized individuals, as van den Hoonaaard seems to ultimately disregard the concept of race and power dynamics throughout interviews. Moreover, van den Hoonaaard employs an active interview approach where a “social reality is constructed through interpersonal interactions as much as it is through words” (p. 82). Thus, interviews act as “meaning-making occasions [that] reveal both the substance and the process of meaning making” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 76-77). Notably, Van den Hoonaaard utilizes this approach to interviews, and cites examples from her own work, which are helpful at illustrating this concept. This illustrates for students through a feminist lens how interviews in qualitative interviews can feature a process of making meaning through differing perspectives.

The multitude of research methodologies delineated within van den Hoonaaard’s text allows for a wide range of understandings for student and beginning researchers. Within descriptions and examples provided in the text, she continues with providing examples of power dynamics and discursive formations of an epistemological and ontological truth at one moment, and how these discursive formations can provide researchers with topics of study. This is adduced through cases that exhibit how providing a medium for participants to utilize can aid the researcher in discovering topics of interest. Exemplifications of this method include “The Hobo,” a study that explored the lived experiences of the urban
homeless in a style developed out of the Chicago School of Sociology. Those within the Chicago School aimed to understand the social relations of urban environments that created power dynamics and the discursive underpinnings that affirmed such relations. Epistemologically, van den Hoonaaard undeniably values the works of the Chicago School, but she still refrains from incorporating examples featuring racialized individuals or mentions of racial inequities and power relations in her work. Her recognition of imbalances in individuals based upon societal precedents and knowledges inaugurates the ideology of power dynamics, but further mention of racial inequities and the discursive formations of these inequities would support her reference of the Chicago School.

While *Qualitative Research* heralds itself as a Canadian text that furthers Canadian research, van den Hoonaaard still cites American studies, such as Altheide and Michalowski (1999), as well as citing the American Anthropology Association instead of the Canadian Anthropology Society (p. 182). The usage of such American examples, while effective in the context of the section that they are being referenced, negate her statement of lauding Canadian qualitative research in particular. Furthermore, although the text is in-depth, the chapter on ethics protocols and procedures is very brief and is written in conjunction with approaches to fieldwork. While I see van den Hoonaaard’s reasoning for amalgamating the two topics into one chapter, for new researchers, the process of filling out ethics forms can seem daunting and requires special attention. Van den Hoonaaard’s narrative writing style flows well for the reader and provides some incentive to continue reading, even as she works through drier material. Her personal narratives, such as emotional stories of interviewing elderly widows, provide some sense of personal connection to the audience and allow readers to feel as though they are taking time to know her personally. Thus, acknowledging van den Hoonaaard’s symbolic interactionist and feminist lens allows the reader to understand that her text is aimed for those who wish to partake in those approaches, but as a general introductory text, I feel that ultimately she provides an accessible writing style that makes *Qualitative Research in Action* interesting for all beginning qualitative researchers.

**REFERENCES**


