BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Heather Hollis, PhD student, Mount Saint Vincent University.

This reader-friendly text pulls back the curtain on qualitative research and allows the reader to see the messiness of the data analysis behind the finished product. Editors Áine Humble and M. Elise Radina (2019) have selected a group of diverse researchers who are willing to be vulnerable and allow the reader to see what actually goes on behind the scenes. It is like having a conversation with multiple qualitative social science researchers in which they lay their work out in front of you and explain how they worked their way through the various obstacles they faced while conducting their research.

Humble and Radina focused on research being done in the family studies area of the social science disciplines. Despite this rather narrow focus, the attention to detail that the authors give to the procedures and steps they go through make the audience for this text much wider than family studies.

The editors state that they chose the title (Moving Beyond “Themes Emerged”) deliberately, as they believe that data is purposefully made and that codes do not “magically emerge from data analysis” (Humble & Radina, 2019, p. xxvii). They joke that this phrase, themes emerged, is so prevalent that even though their authors knew that this was the focus of the book, they still had to be reminded on occasion not to use this expression in their writing.

A detailed introduction sets the tone for the rest of the chapters. The editors outline the steps they went through to develop the book and why they felt it was a necessary addition to the current literature. They say their goal is to “shed light on the usually hidden nature of these processes” (Humble & Radina, 2019, p. xviii) which are often hidden due to the limited word counts in peer-reviewed journals.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is titled “Stories” and it contains just that; stories about the processes the researchers have gone through to produce their work. It consists of 13 chapters, all of which tell different tales of how the authors moved from raw data to written reports. Authors of the individual chapters include solo researchers, small groups, and members of large teams. There is a range of qualitative
methodologies on display in the stories presented, including Indigenous analytical approaches, memoir, research poetry, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. As well, the chapters include a variety of methods for data analysis, from qualitative research software to Word documents to the simple use of different coloured highlighters to identify themes and categories. The stories themselves are engaging and well written and the editors should be commended for selecting researchers who not only told their stories well, but also had interesting stories to tell.

One of the most interesting additions to the book are the eResources that readers can access through an Internet link to the publisher’s website. These supplemental figures include screenshots of software and coding text, memos, photographs, and transcripts, as well as links to previously published works. Within the text of each story, the reader is prompted to stop and view the on-line eResource to see a specific artifact. I found the eResources insightful, but awkward to manage, as accessing these on-line items often disrupted the flow of my reading. If the reader is working from an e-version of the book, I suspect this issue would be less of a concern.

In Chapter 1, Weaver-Hightower talks about the value of having to explain the “wild” and “hybrid nature” of the process he went through when writing his deeply personal essay about his child, who was stillborn. He notes that it is important for qualitative researchers to share the secret that their analyses is, like their lives, often “messy, partial, influenced, and time-and culture-bound” (Humble & Radina, 2019, p. 14).

Some of the authors discussed how they felt when things went wrong with their research. In Chapter 7, Roy, Hart, and Golojuch discuss driving for an hour to meet with participants only to discover that the session had been cancelled, noting that they had to develop a sense of humour to get through the difficult times. This honest explanation of how things can go askew in research was refreshing to read. As researchers, we often believe that everyone else’s research runs smoothly, leaving us upset and confused when our own research hits a roadblock. They were also open about the emotional toll research can have on a researcher: “We carried the imprint of many days in impoverished communities, or for some of us, in correctional facilities working with young men, and it was imperative that we processed our experiences while coding” (Humble & Radina, 2019, p. 105).

There is discussion throughout the book about the use of a variety of QR software programs. The authors are straightforward about the benefits and challenges of using the different types of software and, in some cases, explain why they either switched programs or used another method.

Section 2, “Dialogues,” is much shorter than the first part of the book (20 pages vs. 190 pages), and involves discussions between the authors of the stories. In each short section, the authors are separated into small groups, where they answer questions posed by the editors on four topics – arts-based research, reflexivity, qualitative data analysis software, and data display. This section was very conversational in nature and, similar to the rest of the book, free of jargon and easy to understand.

The editors of the book, as well as the authors of the individual chapters, did an excellent job of making a challenging topic easily accessible to researchers at the novice level. The authors of Chapter 11 sum up the main message of the book: “We hope that by sharing our ways, others can learn from our experience, adopt or modify what makes sense and ultimately develop optimal strategies for conducting qualitative analysis
tailored to specific projects” (Humble & Radina, 2019, p. 172). I believe this book achieves that goal and would recommend it to any social science researcher interested in understanding the inner workings of the process of qualitative research.

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Heather Hollis is a Ph.D. Student in Education at Mount Saint Vincent University where she is a course lecturer in the Bachelor of Education program. She holds an M.A. in Literacy Education and has more than 20 years of public school teaching experience.

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