

## Review of Norman K. Denzin: Interpretive interactionism

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Review:

*Henning Salling Olesen*

**Norman K. Denzin (2002). Interpretive Interactionism** (Second Edition, Series: Applied Social Research Methods Series – Volume 16). London: Sage, 187 pages, ISBN (cloth) 0-7619-1513-3 (£ 46.00), ISBN (paperback) 0-7619-1514-1 (£ 19.99, US \$ 28.95)

**Key words:**  
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**Abstract:** This book is the second edition of a book first published in 1989. It presents and argues DENZIN's particular synthesis of interactionism, hermeneutics and ethnography, which may enable researchers to understand the way in which societal conflicts and transitions appear in the lifeworld perspective. The book goes through the phases of empirical social research, providing summarizing arguments and advice. It brings examples, relying on biographical studies and thick description ethnography. It situates the approach in "the post-modern period." The book may too brief for practical inspiration for readers, unless readers already possess extensive practical experience. What the book does present is a sympathetic reflection on the challenges of applied social research, and DENZIN's position. This review highlights the interesting similarities and differences between American and European interpretational approaches, suggesting that DENZIN may attach interpretation too strongly to the individual and his/her immediate consciousness.

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### **1. A Book with a History**

This book is the second edition of a book originally published in 1989. At that time DENZIN was known for his studies of alcoholism, but he had also published on methodology. In the meantime, DENZIN has become a central figure in qualitative inquiry, due, in part, to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, a volume DENZIN co-edited with Yvonne S. LINCOLN, first in 1994, and more recently a second revised edition published in 2000, now also a bestseller in its paperback version. [1]

As a European I may not entirely understand some of the contexts for which the book was originally written, but I am curious about it because of DENZIN's position as a prominent editor of North American qualitative research. This is the perspective from which the book will be studied. [2]

## 2. What Does (Did) DENZIN Say?

*Interpretive Interactionism* is probably intended to give a methodological program for applied social science, based on a synthesis of symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics and ethnography. The book also takes up examples from, and shares a good deal of its basic assumptions, with feminist research, as far as epistemology is concerned. The book seems to have differing perspectives. For instance, in part of the text DENZIN argues for interpretive interaction as the stance of qualitative social research which is epistemological, methodological, and moral or political in nature. In another part of the text DENZIN seems to try to condense pieces of practical advice, criteria and procedures as listed points. In yet another part of the text DENZIN incorporates examples from his own research on alcoholism as well as examples from other researchers in an easy-to-read essayistic manner. [3]

The interpretation process is the focus. A range or combination of techniques—from open interviews to ethnographic or field observation—may be applied to produce qualitative data. Topics covered such as "securing biographical experience" and "thick description" will provide ideas about the research practices to which the text refers. But the overarching perspective appears in headings such as "the interpretive process," "situating interpretation," and "doing interpretation," this is where the programmatic line of argument is located. There is not much of a distinction between qualitative social research in general and the interpretive stance, rather the latter is seen as the jewel of the former. [4]

The introductory chapter is one of the rewritten parts, because it now refers to "the seventh moment"; in the first version *Handbook of Qualitative Research* there were "four," in the paperback version it had grown to the "fifth moment." This sequence of moments refers to a development history of qualitative research, and the fifth moment, the post-modern, was characterized by the double crisis of representation and legitimation. In the fifth moment the ethnographic scientist had to see his or her attempts to represent as only one out of several possible stories, and itself situated in the field. The present "seventh moment," which is not very clearly identified in relation to its predecessors, seems to include a more active political and democratic engagement of scientists, reflecting their own identity and situated perspective. This seems to be a sympathetic and logical in consequence of the relativization of the role and legitimacy of scientists, that follows from the previous "moments." [5]

However, this continual rewriting of history, adding new stages to previous ones, seems to me a little inflationary and pretentious—most of the internal criteria are not so new, any difficulty differentiating the moments may have to do with their interrelations. But they are only interesting if the internal self-referential history is related to an external one. There are small hints in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, but in this book it appears rather ungrounded. [6]

### 3. And What Can This Book Bring Us?

Both the arguments for the approach and advice on how to do it are listed in points, in a textbook or lecture note format, which some may find helpful because it provides an overview, but I think one needs to know what the overview is about in order to appreciate it. On the practical side, I think the level of abstraction in *Interpretive Interactionism* is very high, making it of little value except to those who have already read more extensively or who have involved in practical research experiences. Researchers and students who are looking for methodological inspiration should look to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* or to concrete studies within the tradition. [6]

What I find most interesting in this book is the way in which DENZIN situates himself and his approach. Mainly it is a very sympathetic "concerned scientist" view. DENZIN goes step by step through all the reasons we know for choosing qualitative methods in applied social research: To reflect openly on what is the real problem, to listen to different stakeholders, to see the strategic perspectives involved in the situation, and to understand the "users" who are involved in most applied social research. The reasons related to understanding the people involved, seeing the meaning some specific phenomenon would have for them, leads to the generalized hermeneutic, interpretive, point of view. [7]

On the whole the text is not an in-depth discussion of the topics it is dealing with. DENZIN presents a stance and garners arguments for this stance. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning may have something to offer many European students, especially those who are working in an environment more or less informed by "traditional" positivist ideals of science. [8]

### 4. The Other America Emerging

At the time the book originally appeared I took little notice. Exposed to the massive behaviorist and positivist dominance in methodology and theory, I had, along with many other critical social scientists, preferred Continental European traditions of critical social science, and we did not seek innovative research inspiration from North America. I think I offended American friends in the mid 1980s when I asked about the state of the art in critical science, explaining that we in Europe had not seen much since the classic works of the alternative American social science from people like MEAD and the Chicago tradition, and in Education (ERIKSON, DEWEY). But I also remember I observed indications of a complementary ignorance in US university libraries and bookshops. Aside from the classical German philosophers there were few contemporary European books. [9]

Since that time I and many others have had to revise our attitudes. Globalization and the increasing dominance of English as the academic lingua franca is one simple but coercive reason. The influence of feminism and ethnographic and postcolonial cultural studies in contemporary critical social science is another, more encouraging, reason. I have become more familiar with the "sub-merged"

traditions of America—we have even been so lucky as to import the hermeneutic tradition. Thomas SCHWANDT, now in Illinois, has for several years acted as a visiting professor in our Graduate School, providing students and faculty with important insights into the links between epistemology and methodology in European hermeneutics and North American qualitative research. [10]

We have learned that there is a rich qualitative research tradition that refers to hermeneutical and phenomenological thinking. Young colleagues tend get their inspiration for qualitative methods in the Anglo-phone literature than in continental European literature, and general textbooks and handbooks on qualitative methodologies like DENZIN's and LINCOLN's flourish. However, while we obviously apply largely similar approaches and share basic attitudes I also often have the feeling that "the ocean is very deep": We do "the same" in different ways and with different implications. "Culture" and "experience" stick in scientific thought and method. [11]

Thus I tend to read DENZIN with much curiosity to discover how European critical social science in the interpretive traditions of critical theory, phenomenology and hermeneutics link with and differ from the "hidden" American traditions that have now come into view on our horizon: Where are these differences? For a comparative understanding, a book with a programmatic intention may be more useful than cookbooks and handbooks and the pragmatic way one reads them. [12]

## **5. Society in the Individual Horizon**

DENZIN refers to a tradition of critical social science from G.H. MEAD via C. Wright MILLS to feminism and ethnography, in the meantime including BERGER and LUCKMANN and the general trend of social constructivism. The point of departure for DENZIN's methodological arguments is with MILLS and the understanding of individual "troubles" as being societal, or "public." This important reflection of the dialectic identity of society as a whole and individual experience and consciousness specifically is extremely interesting in comparative perspective. German sociologist Oskar NEGHT takes MILLS' notion of "sociological imagination" as his point of departure for "exemplarisches Lernen" and his further development of the notion "Erfahrung" [experience], from Theodor W. ADORNO. (I assume that the publisher forgot ADORNO, HORKHEIMER, MARCUSE and HABERMAS in the name index is a result of a coincidental forgetfulness.) [13]

You might reflect on the way in which DENZIN operationalizes MILLS idea of "sociological imagination." He does so by describing the notion of "epiphany" as the moment where a societal relation or phenomenon is recognized by the individual in the biographical context. Doing what I call life history research and working with the idea of experience, I wonder if there is a hidden point in the choice of terms. Nevertheless there is definitely overlap: Learning experiences, turning points in the individual experience of the social, and in the context of critical social science, the idea that critical social insight must always relate to the subjective life world, and provide new possible interpretations to people involved. [14]

Two observations of DENZIN's stance may help to elucidate it: First, in the section dealing with contextualizing phenomena: "the contextualisation brings the phenomenon alive in the worlds of interacting individuals" (p.79)—the whole of context brings the interpretation back into the lifeworld and meaning horizon of the acting individual. Second, DENZIN's remark: "However, the interpretation that researchers develop about their subjects' lives must be understandable to the subjects. If they are not, they are *unacceptable*" (p.84; my italics). [15]

I share DENZIN's point that critical social theory must be dialogical—but the strong linking with the individual horizon of meaning may not carry. The possibility of such a far reaching differentiation or alienation in a complex society making phenomena not immediately understandable, is ruled out as a scientific question if it is not transparent within the individual horizon. The dialectic between societal whole and individual situated consciousness includes dynamics of institution building and learning (or actually dialogue). [16]

At some other occasion it would be interesting to dive more deeply into these questions. I think they are of crucial importance for intercontinental understanding, and also for the clarification of European critical theory and methodology. It seems obvious that the inner scholarly and the outer societal context of this American discussion are very different from that in Europe, especially continental Europe. I find the attempt to find out what those differences are fascinating and challenging. Because of its very elementary nature DENZIN's book may give some hints about it. It is not deep and detailed enough to allow a very precise discussion. However, hints of a central character in the American methodology may be especially interesting. [17]

## Reference

[Denzin, Norman K.](#) & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Eds.) (2000). Handbook of Qualitative Research (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (First edition: 1994).

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