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Student Versus Scholar: A Review of Carol Grbich's Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction (2nd ed.)

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Abstract

Grbich's analysis text is marketed for beginners although it contains some content that may be more meaningful for those with prior exposure to qualitative inquiry. The content of the book might be viewed as a series of contrasts: serious versus humorous; decisive versus flexible; didactic versus experiential. While some content areas are covered in great detail, the role of transcription in analysis is minimized. Recommended use of this text is as a supplemental book in a first qualitative course or as a primary text in a subsequent course.

Keywords

Qualitative Analysis, Contrasts, Qualitative Inquiry

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Student Versus Scholar: A Review of Carol Grbich's *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction* (2nd ed.)

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Grbich's analysis text is marketed for beginners although it contains some content that may be more meaningful for those with prior exposure to qualitative inquiry. The content of the book might be viewed as a series of contrasts: serious versus humorous; decisive versus flexible; didactic versus experiential. While some content areas are covered in great detail, the role of transcription in analysis is minimized. Recommended use of this text is as a supplemental book in a first qualitative course or as a primary text in a subsequent course. Keywords: Qualitative Analysis, Contrasts, Qualitative Inquiry

Before beginning to read the second edition of *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction* by Carol Grbich, I visited the publisher's website. According to Sage, (2013a): "this easy to read text is exactly what you need to get you started in qualitative research" (<http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book236861/samples#tabview=title>). It was while reading reviews from academics also posted on the site (Sage, 2013b) that I began to have a sense that this book might not be so easily categorized. Although there were some reviewers who, like the publisher, described this book as an entry-level text, others implied that this text would be better suited for upper level or at least more inspired students. I left the website wondering which of the two described books I had in front of me: a text for a student trying to master the basics of qualitative analysis, or one for a scholar seeking to deepen his or her understanding of qualitative analysis?

I personally may be best described as falling somewhere between those two extremes; I would characterize myself as a relatively new but enthused qualitative researcher. Within the process of qualitative inquiry, data analysis has, for me, been the most mysterious and intimidating part. This is why I was particularly interested in reviewing this book.

After reading this text, I agree that it serves as the comprehensive overview of qualitative analysis promised by the publisher, although I also agree with those who recommended the text for a slightly more sophisticated audience. In particular, the brief coverage in Chapter 1 of what Grbich termed "research paradigms" (p. 5) may be a lot to digest for the typical (American) graduate student, unless he or she has had previous coursework in research methods, philosophy, or both.

Throughout the text, Grbich presented examples using serious research topics including bulimia, rape, AIDS, and even death, although this is tempered with lighter content, such as use of the 'Jack and Jill' nursery rhyme to demonstrate structural analysis or the description of a "Foucauldian discourse analysis" (p. 248) approach to *Yes, Minister*, a British comedy television series. As I continued to refer to this text, I found additional contrasts and realized that this pattern presented a useful means to summarize the characteristics of this text. Following are several examples of the contrasts I saw in this text, viewed through a framework inspired by Saldaña's (2013) "(v)ersus coding" (p. 115).

Decisive versus Flexible

Grbich was very specific about some things (e.g., there are precisely five research paradigms; three data reduction alternatives for critical ethnography; two stages of preparation for analysis, etc.). This may be confidence inspiring for the beginning qualitative researcher or analyst, although he or she is likely to eventually realize that both the number and items on the lists tend to vary by author. However, Grbich balanced this specificity with demonstrations of flexibility in qualitative approaches. In one instance, Grbich visualized how the issue of homelessness in youth might be studied differently using each of the described paradigms. In the ‘Jack and Jill’ example mentioned above, Grbich demonstrated flexibility in analysis by walking the reader through various “structuralist and poststructuralist” (p. 184) ways of viewing the nursery rhythm.

Didactic versus Experiential

The 15 chapters describing distinct analytic approaches are organized using a structure similar to what a student might experience in a lecture class. In each chapter, Grbich provided overview and process information, presented select examples and common criticisms, and concluded with a list of framework-specific references. The consistent organization of these chapters makes this text a helpful reference for any reader who wishes to key in on a specific framework. However, to discourage readers’ reliance on received information, and to provide opportunities for application of concepts and processes, Grbich included approach-specific practice exercises at the end of each instructional chapter. Although there generally is no single correct answer for these exercises, students are directed to compare their responses with “possible answers” (p. 23) provided on a freely accessible section of the text website (Sage, 2013c). Chapter by chapter lecture slides are also available on this section of the website.

Dearth versus Depth of Information

Perhaps the biggest criticism that I have of this analysis text is that information on the role of transcription in analysis consists of a brief passage in Chapter 2 acknowledging that it is a task that (somehow) needs to get done. I agree with those authors (e.g., Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008; Saldaña, 2011) who have suggested that transcription is the beginning of analysis, so I believe that this topic deserves more coverage. The process of creating ethnographic field notes is likewise given minimal coverage. On the other hand, many topics in this text, such as “preliminary data analysis” (p. 20), the process of grounded theory analysis, and several approaches to conversational analysis are given more depth of coverage. However, an area where I think this text may border on offering too much information is the CAQDAS-devoted Chapter 20. Unfortunately, some of the specific technology information, including version numbers, operating system compatibility, and product or support availability, is already outdated. A better way to provide information on CAQDAS might be via a downloadable but regularly updated chapter offered on the publisher’s website.

Supplemental versus Subsequent

After consideration of these several contrasts, I was still left with the question of who might get the most benefit from this book. Is it the inexperienced, exploring student, or the somewhat more focused scholar who is seeking to strengthen as well as expand his or her skill set? Perhaps not surprisingly, I can see two different uses for this text: as an additional

text in a first course or as a primary text in a course taken following an introductory qualitative research course.

For the student new to research or to qualitative inquiry, I think this book could provide a useful supplement to one of the currently available introductory qualitative methods books (e.g., Creswell 2013; Patton, 2002; Saldaña, 2011). Patton in particular provides a fair amount of information both about transcription and taking field notes. Such a combination would provide students with an overview and a directed analysis text and give students exposure to how at least two different authors categorize and prioritize the various elements of qualitative inquiry.

For students or scholars who have already completed one or more introductory courses in qualitative methods, this book could be used as a reference and guide for practice or actual analysis. Grbich has included a broad range of traditional and less traditional approaches such as critical ethnography, feminism, cyber ethnography, and poetic inquiry, and provided generally explicit directions and many analysis examples. Course instructors could easily use the end of chapter exercises, which provide a starting point for various types of analysis, as in class or homework exercises.

My general impression is that qualitative analysis requires a great deal of practice and thought, but the learning process is greatly enhanced by good instruction. This text provides thoughtful coverage of many approaches to analysis and is organized in such a way as to make it relatively instructor-friendly. While I would not necessarily recommend it as a stand-alone resource, I believe it is a viable alternative for use in a qualitative analysis course.

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