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# The Unremarkable Things Matter: A Book Review of David Silverman's A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research (2nd ed.)

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## The Unremarkable Things Matter: A Book Review of David Silverman's A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research (2nd ed.)

### **Abstract**

In this review of the book, A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research by David Silverman, I write from the perspectives following Silverman's arguments about "unremarkable things matter" in qualitative research. Based on his inspiring thoughts on modern qualitative research, I also express my reflective ideas as a doctoral student.

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Research, Data Collection and Analysis, Application

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## **The Unremarkable Things Matter: A Book Review of David Silverman's *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)**

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*In this review of the book, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* by David Silverman, I write from the perspectives following Silverman's arguments about "unremarkable things matter" in qualitative research. Based on his inspiring thoughts on modern qualitative research, I also express my reflective ideas as a doctoral student. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Data Collection and Analysis, Application*

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The author, David Silverman, an experienced sociologist and constructionist, has never hesitated to share his skepticism and criticism about contemporary qualitative research. This book, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (Silverman, 2013a) is a good example and can be seen as a short but concentrated version of his previous textbooks, discussing similar arguments by being "intentionally opinionated and partial" (p. x). Throughout the book, Silverman implicitly expresses his opinion that in qualitative research, the things that seem unremarkable actually matter a lot. This idea permeates his arguments about the theoretical, methodological, and application issues in qualitative research, which are smoothly incorporated and well-documented in the first five chapters. Based on his ethnomethodology and conversation analysis expertise, as well as his extensive knowledge in literature and art, Silverman organizes the arguments and discussions in an informative and inspiring way.

Silverman opens Chapter 1, "Innumerable Inscrutable Habits: Why Unremarkable Things Matter," by reminding us about practices social science researchers could adopt to observe and understand our society and the phenomena within society. That is, he stresses that we identify the remarkable things in the mundane world, as well as locate the mundane elements (e.g., routine and similarity) in the remarkable settings and situations. Silverman further points out that it is (a) hard to question or penetrate insight into unremarkable and familiar objects and (b) easy to be intrigued by exiting events while ignoring the generality among these events. From my point of view, this is what makes researchers special in learning about and understanding our social, cultural, and economic world. Philosophers, ethnographers, and other researchers can be insiders and outsiders of a social phenomenon or event at the same time, and are able to reveal fundamental meanings without simply relying on predetermined assumptions and categories.

A difference and addition to his second edition, Silverman brings in his ideas about the Internet in Chapter 1. Realizing that in the 21st century the Internet has brought tremendous changes to people's social lives, Silverman includes considerable materials from the Internet (e.g., blogs and web news) in his discussions, and points out that Internet communication has made ethnographic study more complex. Indeed, with the flooding of all kinds of information of different events, it is harder for laypersons and researchers to tell the ordinary from extraordinary or unremarkable from remarkable, and to get the truths of our world.

In Chapter 2, "On Finding and Manufacturing Qualitative Data," the unremarkable thing is the "naturally occurring data," (p. 51) which current qualitative researchers tend to

overlook and underuse as a result of the tendency to rely heavily on interviews and focus groups as data sources(He names these sources “manufactured data”). However, Silverman points out that observable naturalistic data, such as people’s behaviors and interactions in the research field, or the activities on the Internet, have higher capability and reliability than interview data to reveal the patterns of life experiences and inner ideas. Silverman even further suggests that qualitative researchers start a project by first looking at natural occurring data.

When following his argument about data collection, I find it easy to accept Silverman’s emphasis on observing “natural occurring data” in qualitative research, due to his ethnographic background. However, it is hard for me to support his dismissive attitudes on in-depth interviews, which Silverman puts forth as a last resort in research projects. One reason is that in Chapter 2, after pointing out some drawbacks of interview data, Silverman fails to provide sufficient evidence to show why naturally occurring materials are special, and should have priority over interview data. What’s more, as we all know, in-depth interviews mean a lot to qualitative researchers, especially those who favor oral history, storytelling, and narrative, within which interview is the major data collection method. Moreover, even in Silverman’s own field, ethnography, interview is positioned as a major triangulation strategy, having the function of guaranteeing the validity of data sources.

The focus of Chapter 3, “Instances or Sequences,” is data analysis. Influenced by the thoughts of Harvey Sacks, an American sociologist, and Conversation Analysis (CA), Silverman argues that nowadays qualitative researchers disregard how the meaning is constructed through the conversation between researchers and participants. Silverman points out that it is insufficient to simply use extracts from what research participants say to inform the analysis, and qualitative data should be analyzed as interactions to identify the meaning of studied phenomena and how it is constituted. In Silverman’s opinion, this is also the strength of qualitative research, when compared to quantitative research. Then, Silverman, quite impressively, illustrates in several research projects, the capability and function of CA in locating “the interactional sequences (‘how’) in which participants’ meanings (‘what’) are deployed” (p. 84).Therefore, the sequence of conversation should not be unremarkable and neglected by researchers, because it is of great value in revealing how meaning is constructed dynamically.

However, readers should be aware that this very strength of CA can also be a weak point, because CA is not a panacea or necessarily the best choice for analyzing data drawn from the topics related to people’s experiences and feelings, or interactions at an organizational level. Therefore, if Silverman’s point is to introduce Sacks and his CA, he has made it. However, if his purpose is trying to persuade qualitative researchers to adopt CA in their research, he might be on shaky ground.

In Chapter 4, “Applying Qualitative Research,” Silverman places his focus on the applicability of qualitative research. As a matter of fact, in many societies, when regarding to the application of research in real life, the capability or function of qualitative research is ignored or underestimated. Being aware of this stereotyped view, Silverman introduces several high-quality ethnographic studies with practical implications to demonstrate that qualitative research can have a remarkable practical contribution to society, especially in the fields of organizational behavior and professional-client interactions. What’s more, in order to promote the practical relevance, Silverman further makes two more useful suggestions on the presentation of qualitative research. One is that qualitative researchers might consider providing quantified information in their research to improve research validity, and the other is to form the research report according to the needs of potential and responsive audiences.

When reading this chapter, knowledge mobilization and dissemination come to my mind. As a social work doctoral student interested in health conditions of family caregivers,

the application of my research is always a concern for me. Silverman's statement further helps me to think about what my research findings can bring to the design and delivery of relevant programs or services to this particular group of people, and how my research can contribute to social work practice. What's more, as a student who usually favors quantitative methodology, I do appreciate Silverman's open-minded attitude toward quantitative methods. From his arguments, I further understand the importance of knowing both the strength and weakness of quantitative and qualitative research, and applying the appropriate one in different research projects.

My best reading experience occurred as I read Chapter 5, "The Aesthetics of Qualitative Research: On Bullshit and Tonsils," in which Silverman diagnoses contemporary qualitative research as under the influence of modern culture, and finds it is full of "bullshit." I really admire how Silverman puts himself in such a counter-cultural position, a location other researchers might avoid. In Chapter 1, Silverman summarized four contemporary cultural impulses that obstruct social researchers from understanding both the mundane and remarkable sides of our world. In Chapter 5, he delivers a critique of qualitative research from a more fundamental perspective.

The reason that Silverman critiques current qualitative research as "bullshit," is that researchers tend to devalue the issues that he proposes as the aesthetics of qualitative research. First of all, both researchers and students pay much more attention to the theory and jargon, but not how to report the study in plain and understandable terms. Secondly, the focus of current qualitative research seems to be on the "perceptions" or the "point of view" of the participants, rather than on the "facts" or the origins of these viewpoints. The third is that following the culture of the postmodern movement, qualitative researchers are at risk of abandoning the standards of methods and scientific accuracy, favoring instead "lived experience" and "artistic performance," such as poetry and drama. Furthermore, Silverman constructs an anti-bullshit and worthy portrait of future qualitative research, which is to form research ideas with a minimum of conceptual tools, to carry out the research with precise reasoning, and to accurately and comprehensively present the research findings in plain and clear language creating an aesthetically pleasing form.

Silverman follows his own advice. This whole book is written in an easily understandable manner, with little jargon or professional terminology. Furthermore, Silverman's writing style also makes such a study of methodological issues quite accessible. He adopts various examples from academic accounts, literature, drama, photography, and the Internet to support his arguments. These vivid examples make the philosophical and methodological discussions much more accessible to students and those new to qualitative research.

This book could be of great interest to a large audience of scholars and students, policy makers, and practitioners. Silverman's reflective thoughts and enlightening arguments about the trends of contemporary qualitative research, as well as his clear value of the seemingly unremarkable issues, surely will inspire more people to think about constructing inquiry with these markers in mind. As a matter of fact, I am one of the inspired! After reading Silverman's book, I assess my proposed research ideas to his in both my qualitative and quantitative projects. Primarily, I conduct a check: am I missing the unremarkable but fundamental issues?

As a first year doctoral student still in the process of learning advanced qualitative research, I understand that Silverman's present book is not comprehensive and balanced, but specialized. Therefore, for those students or novice researchers who are new to the world of qualitative research, it might be better to first read Silverman's other textbooks, in which similar arguments are illustrated in a more comprehensive and balanced way. *Interpreting*

*Qualitative Data* (Silverman, 2011) or *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (Silverman, 2013b) might be better choices.

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