

## A Comprehensive Toolkit for Qualitative Research in Cultural Studies

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Conducting qualitative research in the humanities requires a myriad of skills and knowledge about how to not only produce new understandings of social and cultural phenomena but also to construct the premises for asking why and by what means, make basic assumptions and recognize the constraints impacting such research. A timely and relevant overview of the issues affecting qualitative research can be found within the covers of a single book, *A Book of Methods in Cultural Studies*, edited by Outi Fingerroos, Konsta Kajander and Tiina-Riitta Lappi, a study that addresses and resolves such challenges with flying colours. The book is a collection of articles on currently relevant discussions in humanistic culture research on the best methods for studying cultural phenomena. It can be used as a textbook and method guide for students and researchers doing qualitative research, especially in the field of cultural studies. It includes articles by authors from the fields of ethnology, anthropology, digital culture research, study of religions and folkloristics and is divided into an introduction and five sections containing a total of 21 chapters.

The book encompasses central aspects of the research process: it starts by introducing the scientific traditions in cultural studies, including *paradigms* and *agenda jumps* (chapters one and two) as well as ethical considerations and data management (chapters three and four, but both themes are also addressed later in the book). It then proceeds to the central role of fieldwork (chapters five to eight), after which it addresses various methods of data production (chapters nine to thirteen) and text analysis (chapters fourteen to eighteen). The last two chapters focus on the process of writing scientific texts and provide guidelines on how to write successful research proposals and funding applications.

The book is defined as a *kaleidoscopic peek* in the sense that it covers topics deemed relevant in contemporary cultural studies, but it is not intended as an 'all-encompassing introduction to every method and theoretical frame-

work' used in the field (10). The reader is given practical tools, such as text-boxes that provide useful information and checklists to help the reader carry out their own research successfully. Many chapters also include data extracts, pictures and examples of how they have been analysed, or otherwise used, in qualitative studies with varying analytical focuses and employing different methods. The main chapters concern observation and interviews (179–205), audiovisual methods (206–231), sensory ethnography (236–258), using archive materials (321–328), discourse analysis (329–350) and magazine data (351–354), to mention a few. References to extra readings are also provided for those who want to learn more about the phenomena addressed in each chapter.

The collection of articles has a clear structure and introduces central concepts and methodological approaches that proceed logically throughout the entire book. The core approaches include what the authors call an *ethnographic attitude*, meaning 'curiosity, attraction of the unknown, interest in the familiar and the everyday, and questioning of the self-evident' (10–11). The ethnographic approach involves interactive *fieldwork* that stems from theory (119–138), i.e. *reflexivity* (e.g. 56), which refers to the researcher's open and active evaluation of their research process and an awareness of their own role and relation to the field. It builds on *hermeneutic* epistemology, where the creation of new understandings occurs via interactions between the researcher, the study participants, the data and the process of interpreting it (51). It involves dialogue and synthesising the *emic* (experiences and perspectives of the study participants) and *etic* (theories used for analysis) perspectives on cultural phenomena. *Culture* is approached in the book as a 'framework for interpreting human action, which people use to structure the world as a meaningful and sensible whole' (49).

The authors introduce a broad variety of theoretical and methodological background literature from both cultural studies and the social sciences and delve into a variety of research strategies and analytical methods. Some are more materially oriented (e.g. the embodiedness of experience in sensory ethnography, 236–258), while others are more constructionist in nature (e.g. discourse studies, 329–350). The way in which the literature is introduced is evidence of the interdisciplinary effort informing the study: different traditions are compared and brought together. Also, ideas on how to combine different disciplinary approaches to form a more comprehensive understanding of a given phenomenon are introduced (e.g. the combining of cultural, ethnological and cognitive approaches is encouraged to deepen understanding of category research in chapter 18, 371).

The authors emphasise the importance of careful planning before carrying out ethically and legally sound research. Chapters three, four and fifteen

especially cover ethical consent, informed participation, data management, archiving and legislation – topics that require consideration and that may pose many practical challenges for researchers. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in particular, which provides the legal basis for collecting personal data and ethical consent, includes terminology that can often seem confusing to many young researchers. One proof of the book's timeliness is that it thoroughly addresses what each of these topics mean in practice for cultural studies research. Lifecycle planning of research data is one practical example of a space where legislation meets research ethical guidelines and data management requirements. Will the data be anonymised or stored with identifiers? Will it be archived, published or destroyed, and how does this relate to current open science practices? What possible challenges do the processes entail? The book prepares its reader to, for example, avoid data loss by reminding them to consider the archive's criteria for accepting research data already when planning the data management phase of the research (86 & 323).

The authors apply an ethnographic approach to their writing. Their text speaks to its reader and is easy and pleasant to read, producing a sense of safety and encouragement with respect to the research process. The authors' reflexivity shows through especially in the humane way the book approaches sensitive research topics and the need for researchers to contemplate their own role in data formation; it likewise addresses the challenging aspects of doing research, such as writing difficulties or recognising that researchers can become discouraged and doubt themselves. One central message given to the reader is that learning via doing is at the centre of ethnographic research, and each researcher's expertise grows through the process of interacting with others in their field. The book often feels like the friendly encounter one needs when their inner critic has seemingly overwhelmed them.

Though the writing is reflexive in most parts, some sections could have been addressed differently. Chapter 16, on discourse studies (346), makes the following claim:

If the goal of a researcher is to make interpretations of some reality outside of language that the use of language is thought to reflect, discourse studies is not the right approach: by its very nature, one cannot access what the divorce process means to the writer, what kind of gender-based discrimination people have experienced or why action has been taken against climate change.

While one can agree with the notion that discourse studies can only provide a limited understanding of, for example, people's personal experiences, it does not mean that discourse studies is adopting the *incorrect* approach to trying to better understand people's experiences or the reasons behind their actions.

In the book *Discourse analysis* (2016, 233–235), Eero Suoninen writes that while linguistic depictions of things, *accounts*, make it possible for people to understand each other, people also form their accounts based on the already available resources for making such things understandable. While these cultural resources are available to people for meaning-making, people's own accounts can also shape how the world is understood after the accounts have been presented. Thus, accounts can also be seen as playing an integral role in the upholding of culture: they maintain social structures and discourses and have various symbolic and material consequences (Suoninen 2016, 233–235) If language is thus seen as something that enables the shaping of culture, and as something that can also have material consequences, then it seems justified to challenge the notion that the study of discourses cannot extend beyond language. However, as the authors of chapter 16 also note, discourse studies include a multitude of approaches, some of which lean towards more extreme forms of constructionism. It is still possible, though, to apply discourse studies in other ways, some of which can also provide better tools for accessing the world beyond language. To lean on the authors' own words, the key is to give a detailed enough definition of one's approach and to 'locate one's research in the field of discourse studies' (346–347).

The book concludes with the realistic observation that before beginning the research process, one must also be successful in the fierce competition for funding, which often requires multiple attempts at writing a successful application. Despite ending with a focus on such harsh realities, the book manages to do it in a supportive manner. The ending could have benefited from a closing chapter that clarifies the central points of the book and motivates the reader further in their future research efforts, but this does not diminish the authors' achievements. Overall, the book provides a timely overview of relevant methodology-related topics in ethnology and related disciplines. It offers guidance and support for researchers on exploring their own approach to cultural studies, on finding their own academic path, and it offers them some tools for blazing such a trail. It inspires and gives hope for the future, while acting as a great example of the strengths of the humanistic approach for writing and doing research. I warmly recommend it to students and researchers doing qualitative research, and to anyone want-

ing to understand more about cultural studies and how the field is related to other disciplines.

## **AUTHOR**

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## **SOURCES**

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