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How *Qualitative Research* Works: An Essay Review

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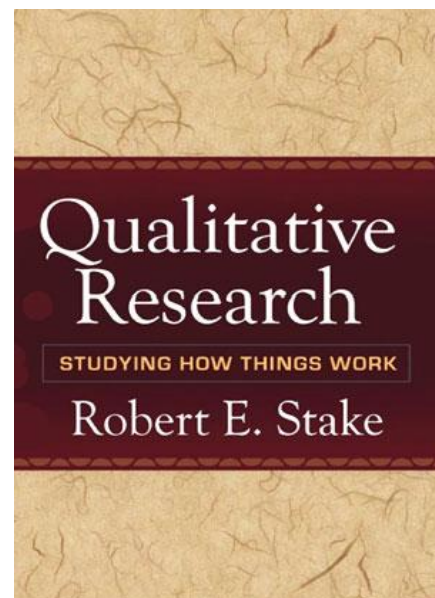
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When I was invited to review Stake's *Qualitative Research, Studying How Things Work*, I was both pleased and a little wary. I knew that Gene Glass, the Editor of this journal, admired the author and had given me a book that he thought was important. The book was signed by the author and the Editor had added some kind words of his own. In addition, the College of Education at Arizona State University, in which I had been a faculty member and Division Director, had recently been disestablished and I had moved to the College of Public



Programs. In the turmoil which followed, Gene, my colleague and friend, had decided to retire from ASU. Understandably, I felt

Robert E. Stake is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.



In 1958, he received his Ph.D. in psychology from Princeton. He served as an Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln from 1958-63. In 1963, he arrived at the University of Illinois where he assisted Thomas Hastings, Lee Cronbach, and Jack Easley in creating the new evaluation center, CIRCE. He has been active in program evaluation and has promoted an approach to evaluation called "responsive evaluation." He took up a qualitative perspective, particularly case study methods, to represent the personal experience and complexity of evaluation studies. He is the recipient of the Lazarsfeld Award from the American Evaluation Association and an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala.

some pressure to write something that would appeal to colleagues inside and outside of education, as well as to say something positive about the new book from an admired colleague of a friend.

My fears eased as soon as I started to read *Qualitative Research*. The book is written with great clarity and offers important ideas and smart suggestions to the reader. I was not unfamiliar with Robert Stake's work. Years ago, I had adopted *Complementary Methods* (Jaeger, 1997), which includes a chapter by Stake titled "Case Study Methods in Educational Research: Seeking Sweet Water" (1997). The chapter begins with a Q & A with a fictitious graduate student trying to understand key issues related to case study methods. Stake introduces the term "sweet water" to suggest that the importance of the qualitative case study is to focus the reader's attention to look into the heart of a program or issue. "When they (American pioneers) found water fit for humans and livestock, it was a precious discovery. Even green or muddy, they called it 'sweet water.' I feel a bit the same way when a case unfolds.... [A] case has character, it has totality, it has boundaries that go beyond a single source or measurement; it is a complex and dynamic system that interests us and more than one story can be told in the case" (p. 402). Stake argues that one needs some kind of conceptual structure, some thematic foci, to prioritize some things about the case and rule others out. Then one looks for patterns, consistencies, repetitions, and manifestations related to the issues being raised. The researcher is seeking "sweet

water,” ideas to refresh sustain, and advance the frontier.

Stake then presents a case study of a pre-session workshop for newly enrolled architecture students at the University of British Columbia (Brauner, 1997). Brauner describes multiple settings in which the students are moved over the two-week workshop (marooned on an island with limited food and shelter; moved to a beach with unlimited stocks of food and drink; then off to a remote glacier and then back to an urban skid row; then off to a music festival in the woods). Stake claims that he is less interested in understanding how well the case captured what actually happened and more interested in understanding how the events described impacted the people involved. The case raises questions about how “faculty cause its incoming students to search their souls” and gain awareness of the “‘consumer society’ in which we live....” The sweet water in the case comes from having a unique and important story to tell and getting it told in a thought-provoking way (p. 413). So an added goal in writing this review was to report on the “sweet water” found in this particular exploration of qualitative research.

More about the Book

Qualitative Research, Studying How Things Work comprises 12 chapters. Each chapter presents vignettes and mini-cases and practical instruments or tools to illustrate processes and procedures. The book concludes with a Glossary of key terms (meanings for the book), Bibliography, Author Index, and Topic Index. The

Glossary provides the reader with meanings of key terms used in the text, while Stake urges the reader “to skip over what you don’t understand.” This advice is part of the wisdom that Stake provides his readers throughout the book.

The book begins by outlining 18 practical projects that could be accomplished as part of a qualitative research course; it includes assignments such as reading at least one classic book by a qualitative researcher (28 sample titles provided), observing a large, organized social event, and preparing a brief proposal for carrying out a qualitative research project. These projects are sensible and provide students with opportunities to gain needed skills.

The book is also written at multiple levels of sophistication, so that an experienced researcher will find much useful discussion of purposes and meaning of qualitative research, while the less experienced graduate students preparing dissertation research will find useful strategies and rules-of-thumb. For someone—like me—planning to teach a course on qualitative research methods, Stakes provides a good balance of qualitative research strategies with practical illustrations of methods and a deeper discussion of the place of qualitative work in the research community and in the world.

Understanding the Particular and Causality in Qualitative Research

Stake’s view is that “qualitative research has moved social research away from an emphasis on cause-and-effect explanation

and toward personal interpretation
“...[P]henomena are intricately related to many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal” (p. 31). Early on, Stake asks readers to consider words that should not be used in formal reports—*very, truly, genuine, lens, surely, always, paradigm*—and then asks us to consider the word *because*. Later, he asks readers to reduce causal language and the language of attribution and replace it with the language of description, where things may be linked but not necessarily in a causal way. He urges readers to control the tendency to conclude that one thing causes other things to happen and instead recognize that some things may have no causes (they may just happen) and other things have multiple causes.

Stake also contends that qualitative research is experiential and emphasizes multiple realities, a collection of interpretations. There is not a single or best explanation, but rather one should strive to collect experiences and describe how things work from multiple vantage points. By understanding the particular, Stake tells us, we gain understanding of complexity. Qualitative research relies on examining the personal experiences of those being researched, as well as the researcher himself or herself; it is relativistic, situated in daily, corporate, government life. Stake says that we all generalize from particular situations; it can't be helped. Stake's priority is to understand how particular things work. For him, the meaning of professional knowledge

—as opposed to science and social science knowledge—is understood in the particular, in the interpretations and experiences of researchers, those being researched, and those to whom information is being conveyed. Knowledge in the professions, in professional practice, is located in the particular and Stake argues that qualitative research offers the opportunity for disciplined study of the particular.

Stake elevates the importance of the personal (personal experience) as he considers how people (and researchers) give meaning to what they see and hear. He illustrates the idea of multiple meanings with a vignette about “Moishe and the Pope,” which illustrates how the participants in the story make entirely different interpretations of the same physical gestures. Anyone who has read Clifford Geertz's (1973) explanation of the multiple interpretations of a “wink” (twitch, wink, parody) will recognize the significance of Stake's much simpler example.

The limited reach of research studies and the claims of causal relationship are often discussed in quantitative texts. Readers are told to look for rival explanations and limits to the external validity of the design. For example, the Hawthorne effect, based on a study at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company and the claim of improved working conditions on worker productivity is often cited as an example of how reactivity interferes with causal attribution. Glass's (1998) tribute to Stake recalls latter's last day on earth as a “quantoid” (October 30, 1961) and describes

the circumstances of his own realization some eighteen years later (June 30, 1978) of the complexity of causal attribution. Convinced by Stake of the inconsistency in his thinking, Glass, talking about studying and evaluating schools, says that “many people can know causes; few experiments can clarify causal claims; telling others what we know is the harder part. It was my last day on earth as a quantoid” (p. 6). Stake provides a glimpse of the complexities in his discussion of evidence, proof, causality, attribution, that occur throughout the book, and which push readers to re-think the challenges of explaining how things work.

Stake is concerned with how things happen, how things are working, what he terms “the personal.” The personal is a reference to the micro, the smaller settings in which the researcher captures and describes how things happen. Stake argues that while it is possible that more quantitatively focused research can inquire into the inner workings of things, the priority is more often on measuring participations, effects, and outcomes across groups without peering deeply inside the phenomena being investigated. The insights and findings which come out of qualitative research are better at explaining the personal and specific case, even while recognizing there is commonality and uniqueness across cases, activities, and events.

Stake urges readers to consider the purposes of the research, and its potential for providing a better understanding of the “here and now,” in looking at how programs and people work. He cites personal

communication with action researcher Stephen Kemmis on what it means to be *here*, in the world, that we are part of a common humanity, and that our lives leave marks on a shared earth, on shared fates. His view challenges readers to consider who they are and how this identification contributes to what is sought and what is found. Discussions that give reference to the human condition are sprinkled throughout and provide the “sweet water” that sustains the reader.

Stake concludes these early chapters with a picture of a whirligig, a practical illustration to summarize the epistemological connections of qualitative inquiry. The illustration shows two overlapping fan blades (qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis) with stronger and weaker ties to: 1) learning about the general vs. learning about the particular, 2) professional knowledge vs. scientific knowledge, 3) microanalysis vs. macroanalysis, and 4) individual experience vs. collective knowledge. Stake sees qualitative analysis with stronger ties to microanalysis, to learning about particulars, to professional knowledge, and to individual experience. The illustration rejects either/or dualities and portrays the relative strengths of each of the connections.

The Middle Chapters: On Qualitative Methods

Subsequent chapters of the text provide explanations, examples, guidelines, rules of thumb, to be used when conducting qualitative research. Chapter 4 (“Stating the Problem, Questioning How This Thing

Works”) looks at how researchers write research questions and lay out the design of the study. Stake illustrates in a single table (p. 76) what often takes hours for novices to understand: what makes for a good research question and why. He brings the reader through an example of a workshop director interested in studying an upcoming workshop, and posits two or three different questions that miss the mark before settling on the key research questions, “What happens at the computer-enhanced workshop oriented to advancing the coaching knowledge and skills of the participants? (p. 80). Stake emphasizes how the researcher’s experiences and preferences influence what questions will be asked and what will be studied. Others looking at a professional development workshop might ask different questions and move the study in a different direction. Stakes makes the discussion specific by creating a design, which includes the research questions and relevant research, and the activities, contexts, phenomena, information sought, and larger issues. He also specifies the data to be collected including the interview data, document data, and proposed minicases. Stakes ends with a general consideration of the types of study that lend themselves to qualitative research methods.

In a chapter on methods and gathering data, Stake examines four different data-gathering methods: 1) observing, 2) interviewing, 3) exhibit questions, and 4) surveys. Each method is explored briefly with examples provided. One important insight is that the researcher himself or herself is still the most valuable instrument in qualitative work,

whether it is experiencing an event, listening to a person with specialized experience, or browsing through records. The research questions provide a compass point rather than a standardized procedure to follow. Stake cautions readers on how difficult it may be to get respondents to look deeply into the complexity of the things being studied. Scenarios or vignettes may press respondents to dig more deeply into their own values and thinking about what they do and why it is important. He emphasizes strategies for gathering data rather than one specific technique.

In Review of the Literature, Stake distinguishes a *systematic literature review* from a *conceptual literature review*. Stake likes the idea of concept mapping which allows one to represent the various concepts that are important to the research, their relative weight of importance (size of concept circle) and relationship to other concepts (proximity of circles). His advice is to build on nearby studies, to pick eight or so of the nearest writings and unpack how they are related to your research questions. He argues that it is better to provide a deeper, richer, more exhaustive coverage of a few key citations than to have larger numbers of superficial citations. This deeper coverage, he argues, will help with subsequent interpretation of the data. Researchers should also draw from multiple sources, print and non-print, and consider the politics of sponsoring agencies. Good advice!

In “Bolstering Judgment,” Stake explains how evidence contributes to judgment. He

is not a fan of evidence-based practice and sees it more as a technological fix than a human process. He argues for the need to distinguish between facts and rationales, and argues that evidence is important in establishing a rationale for actions (“doing something”). Facts do not tell us what to do, or even what needs to be done. He cites Milan Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and suggests

Life is a collection of chance happenings, with every intention and choice vulnerable to overturn by circumstance and impulse. As he told it, everything in the world happens but once, and thus, although precious, human existence has little substance. We feel the unbearable lightness of being. (p. 121).

Stake concludes that we all need to consider the evidence by which all of us make decisions. The evidence should be valid, and relevant, crafted to bolster user confidence, and ultimately subordinate to judgment. Stake says the goal of research as improving our understanding of how things work in particular settings, and that this effort precedes decision making and subsequent judgments about what to do.

Explaining How Things Work: Analysis and Synthesis

Stake’s explanation for how things work involves both analysis (“the taking things apart”) and synthesis (“the putting things together”). The most interesting explanations or examples, Stake calls

“patches,” with interwoven patches contributing to the whole. Stake suggests that most qualitative work is done intuitively and researchers use common sense, and at the same time, follow routines—triangulation, patterns of other research, patterns observed. The researcher draws from observations, quotes, narratives, reflections, and shapes the data into dialogues, portrayals, explanations, insights into how something works. These patches are then put together to form the final research report.

The book illustrates how a patch is created with a story about a classroom teacher’s “bubblegum blowing contest” with different brands of bubble gum used to teach concepts related to measurement (the “Bubble Gum” experiment, pp. 140-149). The patch is part of a larger evaluation of the Chicago Teacher Academy conducted by Stake and his graduate students. The patch raises many questions: How did the teaching work? How did the students experience the event? What didn’t work? In describing what happened, Stake urges research to observe and record closely, in ways the reader can experience it, to elicit the feeling of being alongside the observer. The passing of the day, the permanence of space, nearness of school to neighborhood, wind, sirens, boots by the door—all are relevant to the story. Stake urges readers to see that the meanings of phenomena are influenced by even barely observable happenings: 1) the teacher’s ready explanation in case the principal walks in and is concerned with the noise; 2) the relevance of a math lesson to the complexities of professional development,

3) teacher identity, social status, parent expectations, student engagement, and countless other complexities, 4) the willingness of the researcher to embarrass the observed teacher (or not) when she makes basic math miscalculations; 5) the aspiration of the principal involved in Chicago school reform over past 10 years; and 6) whether it is better for teacher to focus on the immediate math problem or deal with the moral consequences of children stealing the bubblegum. Stake says that these complexities are rarely identified in the research question and only become recognized by the “roaming mind of the researcher;” they are built into a patch — for review, for reflection, and for possible placement in the final report. Stake concludes his discussion of the Bubblegum Story by explaining how the researcher’s assertions are included and then assembled into the final report, which is the final third of the book.

Interpreting and Sorting Qualitative Data

Stake makes the case for carefully storing the data and preparing a plan by which researchers assemble the data into a coherent whole (dissertation, research study, final report). The book explains different ways to store data for future access and illustrates an assembly plan for how the major sections are woven together to produce a final report: topic sections, pages, pages of contexts, issues, intersection of patches, and patches—including quotes, impressions, and other related topics (p. 153). Stake’s tools and instructions provide practical guidance

(craftsmanship) to understand the various stages that one passes through in reaching the final product. He provides steps for each component: data collection, data sorting, and data interpretations. For me, it was like watching “That New Yankee Workshop” on PBS, where Norm builds this beautiful table, and makes this incredibly difficult project look simple and straightforward. I felt the same way as I was reading this book, watching an intellectual craftsman at work.

Stake’s discussion of action research and studying one’s own place of work is interesting on a number of levels. He cautions readers about the pressures they may face and the risks associated with being seen as “self-serving, self-protecting, self-promotional, advocating the home point of view” (p. 163). He urges readers to consider the goals of the research, its sponsors, and how ultimately they influence the questions asked and methods used to answer them. And, he is critical of the corporate point of view, where clients expect researchers to avoid questions that may prove embarrassing. He urges the reader to avoid prematurely changing directions, when it may be better to stay the course.

Stake writes that “bias is ubiquitous,” in the “nooks and crannies” of the settings of the research and in the final report. He is less concerned about the researchers’ subjectivity, which provides important sources of understanding (hunches, intuitions, feel of things) and more concerned with making biases more explicit. Reducing bias then is about being explicit

— making procedures more explicit, putting in the time, crafting meaningful questions, standardizing procedures, piloting formats, going through trial runs, and the like. At the same time, Stake argues the need to balance explication with necessary subjectivity that adds depth to the researcher's perceptions and the assertions made. Self-disclosure of bias, of interest, of invested efforts, adds to the picture. Stake's discussion leads to a deeper consideration of studying one's workplace and dealing with biases that are necessarily part of studying what one knows. Schön (1991) uses the *reflective turn* to indicate the point at which a researcher looks inward to examine himself or herself, and the personal learning that resulted from doing the research.

Toward the end of the book (Chapter 10), Stake introduces the idea of story and storytelling to illustrate how things work. As mentioned earlier, the beginning of the book lists nearly thirty classic books written by qualitative writers. Stake gives readers a blueprint for how to craft a story, for how to bring together the multiple data drawn from observation, interviews, and documents. From the case studies that he has written, he explains how the data form patches, which are in turn crafted into some overall pattern. The final product is the "story"; it is the version of the truth that the authors choose to present for others to read and ponder. Stake's blueprint is of an "iterative" convergence, the repeating again and again using results from the previous stage to inform the next stage.

A great example of a story is a recent book by Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (2009). The book is set in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The story is non-fiction, told through the voices of the main characters, Abdulrahman Zeitoun and his wife, Kathy. The story describes how they experienced the particular events during and after Hurricane Katrina. It is a story of family, of enterprise, of heroic efforts involved in rescuing others, of saving lives and caring for others, people and animals. It is also a horrific story of anti-Muslim bias and of bureaucracy run amok, of human degradation and shame. It is a particular story, and for me, the "objectivity" of the story is less relevant than the human spirit that is represented in it.

Stake discusses in detail one of the case studies from his book *Multiple Case Study Analysis* (2006). In that book, he provides three in depth examples of case studies (The Ukraine Case Study, The Slovakia Case Study, and The Romania Case Study) preceded by chapters which explain single cases, multicases, cross-case analysis, the report, and the specifics of Step-by-Step multicase study project. The chapter describing the Ukraine Case Study (on "Inclusive Education") begins with a List of Characters and a diagram of the study's Plan (p. 120). The diagram includes a circle divided into sections representing multiple parts of the story: 1) locations and sites where programs are delivered, 2) the classroom, 3) teacher-training sites, 4) interviews, 5) observations, and 6) a mini-cases of an autistic boy and his mom. There are half-circles representing contexts of

education in Ukraine: 1) political conditions, 2) economic conditions, 3) research on inclusion. Boxes list the main questions addressed in the study, and the major issues (mainstreaming versus special schools, child-centered versus teacher centered pedagogy, parental involvement). In a half-page figure, the reader is given a roadmap of the study. The next 71 pages present the case itself, with descriptions and representations of people, and settings, followed by the authors' interpretations of education policy and the meanings of inclusion in the Ukraine. The case concludes with a poignant description of a final class lesson with the teacher, an autistic boy, and the other children in a first grade classroom.

Stake includes the graphic design from the Ukraine Case Study in *Qualitative Research* to illustrate how stories are included and make a case for inclusion, at least in the life of one particular boy, family, class, teacher, school, and community. Stake describes teacher actions and classroom interactions. The reader is given the voices of teacher, child, researchers as well as the pro-inclusion ideology of the government sponsored Step-by-Step program. Stake provides the blueprint for how 20 patches on 16 topics fit together to make up the Ukraine Case Study. He also considers how themes and issues—what he calls *quintains*—run across multiple cases. Stake concludes his blueprint by explaining how one writes the final report. He describes an *iterative* process (defined as “deliberately repetitive” in the Glossary), in which qualitative researchers build on previous stages to

inform the next stage. He writes that iteration allows the researcher to prioritize the order and strength of the evidence and see how patches fit together. One starts closer to the research questions in deciding how to move from initial outline to subsequent versions.

The final chapter of the book provides a sensitive consideration of advocacy and ethics in qualitative research. He suggests that all research is advocative. He advises researchers that reaching out with care and respect may not be enough and alludes to his own doubts in telling the story of the Roma during his case study project (Stake, 2006). Researchers need to understand the responsibilities they take on when giving voice to the private lives of others, invading their space, breaching someone's privacy, even when permission is given.

I know that a reviewer is expected to come up with some criticisms or recommendations for the book being reviewed. Truthfully, I did not see much to criticize. There are probably a few more words/meanings that could be added to the Glossary of Meanings (pp. 217-221). I might add the idea of reflection, especially since I used it in this review. I would also add *recursion* to the Glossary as it adds to the discussion of iterative convergence. Stake (1997) ends the case study chapter with a comment on recursion. “One of the devices of presenting interpretation is to present a dialogue, then stand back and talk about the meaning or technique of that dialogue” (p. 413). He writes that dialogue facilitates reflection and elevates the level of interpretation; it is a

way for research to dig more deeply into the meanings of a case and get those meanings shared with readers (p. 413).

I like books that fulfill my need to understand the topic, have important things to say, and are accessible at different levels of experience and expertise. Every chapter in Robert Stake's *Qualitative Research* is thoughtful, and presents a richly textured understanding of what qualitative research tries to accomplish and how it furthers our understanding of the human experience. The combination of clear writing, practical guidelines, and illustrative examples, makes for a great book. I have ordered the book for a doctoral level course on qualitative research methods that I will be teaching next semester. I would adopt the book as a required text in qualitative inquiry and qualitative methods courses aimed at graduate students in education and other professional disciplines such as public policy or public affairs. *Qualitative Research* is also a great read for anyone interested in understanding how the world works.

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