Review of *Qualitative Research Approaches for Public Administration*

by Larry S. Luton

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With the publication of *Qualitative Research Approaches for Public Administration*, Professor Larry S. Luton provides a general guidebook to qualitative inquiry. The objective, he explains, is to aid the field of public administration in a methodological transition, presumably from quantitative to qualitative research. His book begins with the strong claim that the time has come for public administration “to take qualitative research approaches more seriously.” We have reached this point, it seems, more than 60 years after Dwight Waldo critiqued the quantitative research approach for its fallacious construction of a fact-value dichotomy.

The book offers, in a concise manner, a basic introduction to four common techniques of the qualitative approach to inquiry. Professor Luton limits his choice of techniques to the four most common qualitative approaches: interviewing, narrative inquiry, ethnographic approaches, and case-study approaches. Each technique is explored through the lens of exemplars, peer-reviewed articles published in major journals of the field. The chapters begin with a brief overview of the approach followed by practical advice for the aspiring researcher, including discussions about research design, types of data, analysis of data, and composition. Summaries of major points in the chapters, such as logistical challenges or reasons for choosing a particular approach, are provided in separate graphics as sidebars.

Part of the purpose of focusing almost exclusively on the techniques is to provide a structured depiction of what qualitative research entails. The author’s discussion of each approach is intended not only to guide researchers but also to suggest boundaries to the approaches so as to debunk the claim that qualitative analysis is simply all that is not quantitative. Qualitative analysis, when properly conducted, is a structured approach to inquiry defined by the questions asked and how one intends to understand. Sometimes the question is not obvious beforehand, but even then how one proceeds to gather information must be deliberate and clearly pursued. Professor Luton’s book succeeds in illustrating how qualitative approaches can and should be systematic. And, like any systematic
approach, there are challenges to remaining honest to the inquiry while fulfilling technical requirements, which the author discusses alongside the relevant aspects of each technique.

Exactly why the field should take qualitative approaches more seriously, however, is a question Professor Luton never answers. Instead, he depends on exemplars to demonstrate how respective techniques within the qualitative approach are achieved. In this regard, the book is much more useful as an introductory text to qualitative techniques (how to conduct the research) but is unsatisfactory as an introduction into qualitative inquiry (why and with what objectives one conducts the research). The extent to which the book constructs an argument in favor of qualitative research is limited to general claims about how the work of public administration scholars must have a pragmatic dimension that attends to the needs of practitioners, who are more concerned with getting things done. A brief mention of causation suggests that qualitative approaches are more flexible to engage alternative causal arrangements that are perhaps ideographic, emergent, or generally unnoticed due to the interconnected nature of the system. The reader who, in taking qualitative inquiry more seriously, expects to understand more deeply the qualitative-quantitative dispute will be disappointed.

For example, the chapter on ethnographic approaches satisfactorily outlines technical challenges, such as acquiring access to subjects, defining the scope of the project, and allowing the project to evolve with the inquiry. However, any discussion of hermeneutics or the process of understanding is completely absent. A skeptic of qualitative approaches is offered no clarity, an advocate no solace. The book is largely devoid of any discussion about how these approaches are more effective in generating knowledge than the quantitative approaches that have dominated the field for decades.

Moreover, qualitative research is decidedly more challenging than quantitative approaches for the very reasons that are not mentioned in the book—the difficulty of reaching consensus in the academic community coupled with the ultimate goal of achieving a better understanding of the subjects of analysis. The challenges inherent in each respective approach are regarded, but only in a limited manner. For the most part, the challenges discussed in the book deal with those directly related to the actual conduct of the research, and in this manner the chapters demonstrate how demanding and time-consuming qualitative approaches can be, but not the challenges associated with reporting. Although each chapter does mention the composition and presentation, this is bizarrely restricted to how the reporting might vary from the standard scientific paper constructed upon the procedures of the scientific method: introduce the problem, suggest a hypothesis, outline methods, report results, evaluate findings. Some attention in each chapter is given to the communication of findings, but this very controversial aspect of qualitative research does not get the attention it deserves. Arguably, a call to arms such as that which Professor Luton announces in the first sentence of his book—
that it is time to take qualitative approaches more seriously—suggests that some of the common concerns with qualitative approaches will be addressed. Instead, the seriousness is limited only to defining more distinctly what qualitative means through exemplars.

Admittedly, this qualitative approach to exploring qualitative research is not problematic; but neglecting to address important points raised by the use of these techniques, when contrasted to the conventional approaches, is. Some of the challenges of taking qualitative research more seriously are noted but not really explored. For example, the author explains that many qualitative studies result in book-length publications and take far longer than quantitative approaches that depend on previously acquired or already established databases. That such studies do require more time to conduct and more text to report potentially conflicts with the situational structure of the profession, which in many cases encourages that researchers produce many publications in leading journals as a demonstration of success. Another point raised is the relationship of qualitative research with the paradigm of the scientific method. Professor Luton notes that there is an ongoing but unresolved discussion about how practitioners value case-study research more than the scientific method; he also notes that the approach lends itself well to researchers as advocates. But, he does not elaborate on this unresolved discussion beyond simply stating the position. Should our research be dictated by what practitioners want, or are we in the profession of speaking truth to power? Do we compromise our research agenda when we consciously and overtly engage in advocacy?

To a certain extent, Professor Luton addresses these concerns from a methodological standpoint by urging the prospective researcher to always attempt to clarify personal connections, biases, and opinions if they are relevant to the study. He also notes that rarely in qualitative research is this done appropriately. Of course, one is justified to wonder if qualitative research can ever be taken “more seriously” if researchers persistently fail to expose their prejudgments. On the other hand, we can note that even in quantitative analysis, judgment is inherent in deciding what data to use, what to study, and what relationships exist \textit{ex ante}. This raises the question about what distinguishes quantitative from qualitative if the former often involves judgments and interpretations and the latter sometimes employs numbers and statistics. Perhaps this is the type of discussion that one expects when told that the time has come to take qualitative research more seriously and that the book will help facilitate the transition.

Perhaps, though, it is not fair to criticize the book for lacking a sufficient discussion on questions about understanding, consensus, interpretation, and knowledge as it pertains to qualitative inquiry. It may be the case that I simply misinterpreted this claim that it is time to take the approaches of qualitative inquiry more seriously; maybe taking the methods more seriously entails only delineating the approaches. Or perhaps I am justified in my assertion that a
claim to take the methods more seriously entails a discussion about these points despite what the author intended. These types of questions that deal directly with interpretation and context are the types that we are required to consider if we choose to take qualitative analysis more seriously; unfortunately, they are not addressed. We cannot simply begin by outlining how to do it—we need to understand what it means to inquire into a problem qualitatively and how to judge conflicting reports or interpretations of similar (if never the same) phenomenon. Only then will those of us willing and able to engage in qualitative analysis be taken more seriously.

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