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Review of Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine, and Dvora Yanow "Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes"

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Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes, by Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, New York and London, Routledge, 2012, 184 pp. ISBN 9780415878081

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This slim text, the first volume in the *Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods*, is not an instruction manual or a “how to” book for doing interpretive research. Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow eschew the instrumental, mechanistic approach to research design found in most “methods” texts and turn instead to the notion of research as *practice*. In doing so, the authors have delivered the book that many in the interpretive research community—particularly, those recently introduced to the interpretive perspective and still trying find their bearings—have been waiting for.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow explain that “[r]esearch design is about making choices and articulating a rationale for the choices one has made” (p. 2). But how does one go about designing research and articulating choices when engaging an interpretive social scientific project, concerned with meaning-making rather than hypothesis testing, for which “the scientific method” is of no use? The authors’ effectively address this question in a manner that is practical and systematic, and—because different interpretive methods follow diverse logics of inquiry—carefully avoids suggesting any prescribed research design. Their emphasis is directed toward the “concepts and processes in interpretive empirical research design, and the methodological issues they raise, looking across methods of generating and analyzing data” (p. 9). To accomplish this aim, the defining characteristics, questions, and concerns of this research perspective are placed alongside those of positivist-informed approaches (both quantitative and qualitative), which successfully bring into focus the constitutive elements and rhythms of designing interpretive research. Refreshingly, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow execute this without defensiveness or polemics, instead relying on insightful empirical examples, colorful analogies, and clear argumentation to make their text accessible and engaging for a wide audience.

The book’s eight chapters (not including the Introduction) can be generally categorized into three sections. The first two chapters make a case for the necessities of research design and consider the logics of inquiry of interpretive research, with a particular emphasis on the origins of research questions. These chapters are valuable for a number of reasons, including the authors’ discussions concerning the fundamental distinction between methods and methodology (p. 4), the often-overlooked differences between quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive research (p. 5), the intertwined nature of “fieldwork,” “deskwork,” and “textwork” in interpretive research projects (p. 7), the role of prior knowledge in developing research questions or “puzzles” (pp. 25-26), the notion of a literature review as the written record of a dinner party conversation (p. 35),

and most significantly, an accessible discussion of abductive reasoning accompanied by effective demonstrations of the recursive-iterative nature of this logic of inquiry.

Chapters 3 through 6 explore key issues that inform the choices of an interpretive researcher. The first of these chapters explains that “[t]he interpretive orientation toward knowledge, with its focus on meaning-making (instead of a priori model specification) and contextuality (rather than generalizability), ripples through the entire research design process” (p. 48). Having established the orientation and logics of interpretive research in this concept-heavy chapter, the following three chapters deliver highly practical contributions. Chapter 4 presents valuable insights and recommendations regarding “getting going” on an interpretive research project; specifically addressing the need to make important choices regarding access to data, the researcher’s roles and accompanying challenges, and the importance of design flexibility. Understanding the character of evidence and how it is “generated,” rather than “collected,” by interpretive scholars is taken up in Chapter 5, which also includes a short but useful section on the importance of field notes. Chapter 6 is concerned with designing trustworthy research and various means of evaluating this trustworthiness. It concludes with a convenient table that “sums up” the “[c]ontrasting approaches to research and its design,” which clearly and concisely draws out and explicates the fundamental differences between interpretive and positivist approaches (p. 113).

The book’s brief last two chapters consider interpretive research designs within broader contexts. Chapter 7 considers questions regarding the ethics and potential complications that come with working with human participants, the politics of data archiving, and the writing up of research manuscripts. The final chapter pulls back from the authors’ primary purpose to “elucidate what it means to conduct research informed by an interpretive approach” in order to express the desire that their efforts may also “enable scholars from different epistemic communities to converse with one another” (p. 130). Along with taking up the challenges of “speaking across epistemic communities,” Schwartz-Shea and Yanow offer an argument concerning recent calls for “mixed methods” research in the social sciences. Returning to the fundamental distinction between methods and methodologies discussed in the Chapter 1, they contend that while mixing methods is unproblematic on its face, when those methods are informed by conflicting methodologies and their respective ontological and epistemological presuppositions, the research produced “is not logically consistent or philosophically coherent” (p. 133). That this timely and relevant argument is so briefly taken up in the conclusion of this book is a disappointment. Hopefully the authors will develop it more fully elsewhere.

Another disappointment, although slight in nature and with no detracting from the overall effectiveness of the book, are Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s final two pages of “concluding thoughts” on “practicing interpretive research.” The previous pages are replete with valuable discussions of the key concepts and processes of interpretive research design, each practically explained and grounded in empirical examples and engaging narratives. By the end of the final chapter, the energy and impact of the earlier writing seem to have been exhausted and the authors do not drive home their contributions, but rather undersell their significance: “We hope

to have provided a way to think about the differences in logics of inquiry across various approaches to science and a conceptual vocabulary for naming and talking about those differences” (139). This text is not simply an introduction to thinking and talking differently about the scientific enterprise, no more than it is an instruction manual on how to do it. Rather, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* is an indispensable handbook that should have a place on the bookshelf of every politics, policy, and public administration scholar whose work is informed by an interpretive approach. More importantly, in regards to shaping the future development of these social scientific disciplines, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s text should have a place on every Research Design and Methods syllabi. That way, regardless of their methodological persuasions, students will become as familiar with the practice of interpretive social science research as they are with alternative approaches.