

Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*. New York, NY: Guilford Press. 244 pages.

*Reviewed by Douglas Dollinger*

Robert Stake's most recent contribution, *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*, has two principal thrusts. The first deals with the general status and character of qualitative research within the sciences—what we might call its epistemological status. The second deals with a practical and helpful treatment of the different stages of conducting qualitative research. I will cover each of these in turn within the scope of this review. Regrettably, there is not enough room to do full justice to such a rich and thoughtful text.

Maybe we should start with the title: *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*. The simple but critical point to notice here is that, for Stake, qualitative research is about coming to understand how things work, a point made repeatedly throughout the book. In this respect, qualitative research stands on par with any other effort at disciplined knowing. The reason for mentioning this elementary point is that qualitative research, as Stake is at pains to point out, is interpretive, episodic, contextual, situational, experiential, personalistic, and particularistic. It has therefore struggled, and indeed still struggles, for epistemic legitimacy against the lingering ghosts of positivism.

Positivism in its many forms insisted that genuine knowledge rests on idealizations that abstract from the particular and episodic features of things, thus allowing for the articulation of broad generalizations, if not universal assertions amounting to statements of scientific law. Positivism also asserted that genuine knowledge is objective. When for instance we measure the spin of an electron, we are, it is presumed, determining a state of a certain thing outside us. Simplifying considerably, the object of study stands outside the subject; for all theoretical purposes the subject drops out of the picture. What we end up with is what the philosopher Thomas Nagel has called, colourfully, “the view from nowhere.” Getting to the object means leaving the subject behind.

Qualitative research, while it studies things that might be called objects—school programs, for instance, or organizational policies—are not objects simply given to us in space and time like rocks and stars.

Rather, we constitute them; they are our creations. Their history, then, is from the beginning largely a story about us. Moreover, given that we constitute ourselves as individual selves, and as individual selves constitute ourselves differently, there is no underlying uniformity in the things under study that will allow us to make universal assertions in this case. Different individuals will experience the same program in very different ways. What we think, feel, perceive is relevant to explaining how human things work because what we think, feel, and perceive will become embodied in the object under study. Here we simply cannot separate the subject and the object, the knower and the object of knowing. Knowing how things work in this case is in a crucial respect knowing their consequences as measured by reference to thought, feeling, and perception. Experiential understanding, or *verstehen*, is required to gain insight and knowledge.

Although his discussion of these bigger issues warrants careful study, perhaps the principal virtue of Stake's book is arguably its practicality. Large parts of Stake's book read as a kind of manual for qualitative researchers. Chapter 11, for instance, is entitled "Writing the Final Report." Its title is exact: Stake guides readers through the preparation of such a report. Graduate students faced with the subtleties of writing up qualitative research—and there are many such subtleties—would be well advised to consult it. The discussion of literature reviews in Chapter 6 is also quite close to the ground, as is Chapter 4 on "Stating the Problem." More generally, Stake translates his own professional experience into diagrams, tables, and other practical aids that can serve to assist qualitative researchers in defining research problems, identifying relevant sources of evidence, and interpreting the findings, all of them of immediate applicability.

In sum, Stake goes a long way toward showing how qualitative research works, in concreto as it were. And he does so with a careful measure of practical wisdom. For instance, he understands that qualitative researchers are prone to get lost at the very outset of their quest to know, usually by failing to plan out the research. At the same time, a research plan, although an important and common tool, cannot be adhered to mechanically. The process of qualitative research is reflective and iterative from the start: we plan, we gather data, we see things we might have anticipated and things we have not anticipated at all, we reflect, and then we adjust our plan in light of what we now know and do not know. A good qualitative researcher knows how to fly by the seat of his or her pants. This does not mean that one flies without well-founded methods and techniques—much

of what we call science, as Dewey pointed out, consists in the practice of applying methods. What it means is that we must be open to the emergence of new perspectives as we conduct research, or to what Stake calls multiple realities. The emergence of the unexpected and enlightening is one of the chief joys of doing research. A research plan that deprives us of this joy by narrowing our field of vision to one grand point of explanation often makes for dull research.

This of course is not unrelated to the general debate about the status of qualitative research. Perhaps the best response to someone who doubts that qualitative research is possible is simply a detailed demonstration of how it can work, and this is what Stake gives us. If we want to advance the use of qualitative research as a legitimate instrument of knowing, we need to be able to show it works.

I am reluctant to be critical of such a good book. I should like to make two quick points here, touching more on matters of organization and style than on content.

First, the discussion at the end of the book, especially the discussion of epistemology and the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* in subsections 4 and 5 of Chapter 11, should be merged with the opening sections of the book that deal with broader epistemological matters like interpretation and experiential knowledge. If a unifying model of qualitative knowing is important to this discussion—and this I think is the point of bringing up the notion of *phronesis*—then it seems to me these earlier, more general sections would be the more logical home for it. Otherwise it appears to dangle, and it is too important to dangle.

Second, Stake closes his book with a chapter on advocacy and ethics. The issues here will be familiar to qualitative researchers. Stake talks about six different advocacies that are common in qualitative research. Advocacy on behalf of the groups we work with is an example. The advocacies Stake mentions are no doubt important. But there is another kind of advocacy that Stake leaves out—advocacy on behalf of qualitative research itself. One of the first things anyone discovers who makes the attempt to apply qualitative methods within organizations—say, to understand where people stand with respect to a contemplated change in policy or practice—is that managers will tend to dismiss such research as soft, fuzzy, windy, flimsy, and unprincipled, especially if it runs counter to their own impressions of things. Skepticism of this factitious kind usually emerges not so much at the outset as at the end of the research process when conclu-

sions are being drawn. It is then that we will hear off-the-cuff and dismissive statements such as “The employees are just angry about the pay freeze from last year” or “Our employees are simply angry about the merger with the agency.” The question here is, How does one defend the integrity of qualitative findings? I suspect Stake could help us with this, too.

These criticisms, it will be noted, are not about finding fault with the gist of what Stake has to say or quibbling over the details of his assertions. Rather they are simply intended as a means of improving a text that already has plenty of merits as it is. In all, Stake has done a splendid job introducing both beginning and more experienced readers to the field of qualitative research, and he has done this in such a way as to convey a clear, practical sense of how good qualitative research should be done. The book should be read by students, teachers, practitioners, and anyone else who seeks to understand the human enterprise in a methodical and disciplined way.