

Book Review

Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate

Immy Holloway and Lorraine Brown
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012

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As a doctoral candidate currently collecting data using qualitative methods, I reviewed *Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate* with minor trepidation. Would Holloway and Brown's text provide reassurance of the qualitative path that I had followed or would I find that my doctorate, when measured up against the authors' suggested "essentials" (p. 12) be somewhat lacking? These questions were, I felt, important to ask in the context of reviewing this book, as I have until now considered my doctorate to be a worthwhile and largely rewarding endeavour. Holloway and Brown promote their book as "an excellent resource for doctoral students of qualitative research and for those who are still considering whether to make the leap" (rear cover), therefore, I expected my questions to be easily answered.

Holloway and Brown completed their doctorates "mainly for their own satisfaction" and used their experiences to capture "the most important aspects of the qualitative doctorate" in this book (p. 12). The authors determine their intended audience for this book as "doctoral candidates writing their dissertations in English, and in English speaking countries" (p. 11). In the introduction, they attempt to explain the differences between doctorates in the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and any other nations that follow the British model. In Britain, students typically attend research and ethics sessions, however, these training sessions would not usually be formally assessed. In an attempt to provide a useful resource for all students who undertake qualitative studies, the authors choose to employ doctorate rather than PhD, acknowledging the existence of various forms of doctorates. The introduction does not offer an in-depth analysis of possible choices of where to study for a qualitative doctorate; it assumes rather that this choice has already been made.

The book comprises 12 chapters, which are then sub-divided into four sections. In the first section, the authors introduce the essential qualities and framing of qualitative research, outlining its distinctions from quantitative research. The second section of the book is called the initial stage, and comprises Chapters 2 to 6: choosing a research topic; selecting a research approach; writing the research proposal; ethical considerations; and the role and location of the literature. In the third section, the research journey, Holloway and Brown contemplate the monitoring process, the qualitative research process, and potential problems in these processes through Chapters 7, 8, and 9. In the concluding section of the book, Chapters 10, 11, and 12 form the final stage, and attention is turned to writing up, examination and defense, and dissemination of the dissertation findings.

Chapter 1 opens by reiterating, "you have decided to do a qualitative doctorate" (p. 15), and subsequently directing students to consider why they have made this choice. Perspectives on the

qualitative approach are considered and insights offered into the broad differences between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The authors do not describe mixed method approaches where quantitative and qualitative methods are both employed within one study. The authors provide a table highlighting these differences, with a caveat of these not being absolute or exhaustive. To mitigate this constraint, it might have been useful to direct the reader to additional reading here. Holloway and Brown provide an interesting commentary regarding common traits found in qualitative research and direct the doctoral student to a range of further reading. The culminating section on reflexivity is particularly valuable, as it encourages doctoral students to think about their positions within their research early on. In addition, Holloway and Brown warn of the potential dangers of navel gazing and self-absorption, though they stop short of suggesting how to manage this process.

Chapter 2 moves the doctoral journey into the initial stage. The authors focus initially on how to select a research topic and develop the research question or problem. Holloway and Brown discuss the research question and problem from a seemingly either/or perspective. Though I would agree that there are difficulties in separating a research problem from a research question, I am surprised that both were not highlighted. The research problem is the specific contextual issue that the research question seeks to answer. I feel that the importance of a necessary alignment between the research problem and research question has been overlooked here. The remainder of this chapter covers the topics of feasibility, relevance, manageability, enthusiasm and interest, and changing and knowing the aim of one's proposed research. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding timelines, reminding doctoral students to be mindful of their own institutional requirements.

Chapter 3 begins with the caveat of "this is not a method text" (p. 39), and I appreciated the authors' reminder of this. The authors concentrate on the characteristics of "four popular approaches" (p. 39) of qualitative study including ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative research. Discourse analysis, action research, and performative social science approaches are merely listed as possible choices. Some key principles of qualitative study are shared and further reading is encouraged. The authors acknowledge the limitations of this chapter. However, I found one particular statement misleading. When discussing phenomenological approaches to qualitative research, the authors introduce hermeneutic phenomenology and suggest "a lack of guidelines for students to follow" (p. 42). There are, in fact, several journal articles and at least one book describing the specifics of undertaking a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological approach (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Conroy, 2003; Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012; Kafle, 2011; Kakkori, 2009; Koch, 1995, 1996; Sammel, 2003).

In chapter 4, Holloway and Brown tackle proposal writing. From the outset, they strongly advise doctoral students to examine other qualitative proposals and to consult individual institutional requirements to avoid mistakes. The chapter provides a clear and logical step-by-step approach to proposal writing. However, the process is rather generically described, and highlighting the variations that exist within different fields, institutions and nations would have broadened the relevance of this chapter. The process outlined in this book is, I suspect, what one would normally find in a UK university. As a contrast, the production of a literature review would likely be a component of comprehensive examinations (Elgar, 2003) in Canada, which would typically be undertaken approximately half way through the doctorate and would culminate with a proposal defense.

Chapter 5 introduces ethics. Once again, I suspect that the ethical considerations are

situated within the UK university context. Nevertheless, the authors suggest some thoughtful considerations. The practical examples of ethical dilemmas that are interspersed throughout the chapter are particularly useful, providing clear signposting of potential ethical dilemmas. This contribution reinforces the importance of adhering to institutional requirements regarding ethics and Holloway and Brown recommend seeking out further guidance from advisors.

Chapter 6 concludes the initial stage of the doctoral journey with a focus on the role and location of literature within qualitative research. Basic concepts of undertaking a review are introduced and a checklist to facilitate critical review techniques is offered. However, the authors suggest that in following their suggestions, any subsequent “literature review will be appropriate” (p. 73). I would have expected a caveat encouraging doctoral students to seek further advice from their supervisors regarding the structure and content of their literature reviews. Holloway and Brown conclude with consideration of practical issues. They rightly remind doctoral students of the need to carefully catalogue and manage the literature review process and create a record of literature searches and results. However, ways to catalogue and store are largely ignored; for example, the many information technology software programs designed purposefully to create citation libraries are overlooked.

Chapter 7 moves into the research journey, commencing with the monitoring process. The authors describe how it is important for a student to choose an advisor at “an early stage in the process of writing a doctoral study” (p. 81). However, in North American universities, advisor selection can be part of the admissions process. It might have been prudent to discuss advisors and supervision in an earlier chapter of the book. Regardless, the main thrust of this chapter is to emphasize how advisors, supervisors, and mentors are responsible for overseeing and counseling students and the overall monitoring of doctoral studies. From the outset, the authors describe the importance of the student and advisor relationship, identifying rightly its fundamentality to “the completion and success of the doctorate” (p. 81). Though not discussed in depth, sufficient attention is given to the nuances of managing academic interactions with advisors and some broadly defined resolutions to overcoming typical challenges are offered.

In chapter 8, Holloway and Brown attempt to describe the entire qualitative research process. They remind readers how the process is “unlikely to be straightforward or chronological, or that it progresses in even steps” (p. 91). They recommend initial tasks for candidates beginning to organize their data and write. Consideration is also given to the selection of appropriate filing systems and the necessity of tracking one’s data through concept maps, diagrams, and flowcharts to detect patterns and relationships. The authors remind readers of the need to keep copies of data and back up computer files. Some horror stories are provided to warn of the dangers inherent in not saving data. However, some aspects of data management are overlooked, for example, the requirement to securely store data to protect participants’ confidentiality and dealing with extraction of data should a participant withdraw after data has been collected. I appreciated the inclusion of *Toward a Conclusion*, as the doctoral process can be a long and lonely road to embark upon. An optimistic focus on completion is helpful, even from the very beginning of the journey. Attention is given to publishing, with a practical reminder of how beneficial this can be to the writing process and presenting at academic conferences as feedback can “help you to advance your study” (p. 102).

Chapter 8 moves smoothly through the research process, and Chapter 9 counterbalances through the identification of potential problems in the research process. In particular, the authors highlight academic problems, personal issues, and misconduct. They provide some level of reassurance for doctoral students in that they are not alone in experiencing frustrations and

tensions in successful completion of their programs. They relate how lacking in confidence, having a lack of data, being overwhelmed with data, dealing with writers block, and ensuring that one minimizes the risk of one's research being duplicated are all potential obstacles to doctoral completion. Personal issues include managing conflicts in one's time and overcoming life crises. However, I found the statement that "women in particular find problems in managing their family, doing housework, and making sure that their partners don't feel neglected" (p. 112) somewhat provocative. I would like to see empirical evidence for this statement, as this perspective could deter women from undertaking doctoral studies, and implies women likely have a more complicated life outside of academia than male counterparts!

The book concludes with the final stage, the writing up of the dissertation. In Chapter 10, a succinct outline of the expected structure of a qualitative dissertation is provided: outlining title, abstract, acknowledgments and dedications, table of contents, introduction, methodology, sample and setting, specific techniques and procedures (data collection), data analysis, validity, entry issues of collecting data, ethical considerations, findings and discussion, conclusions, references, and appendices. I expected to see a rationale of study, literature review, purpose, and research questions specifically listed, although they are embedded into the introduction. Nevertheless, this chapter provides a clear explanation of the expected content and the authors remind students to check their own institutional requirements.

In chapter 11, Holloway and Brown consider the examination process and defense of the dissertation. The chapter opens by emphasizing the importance of careful proofreading. This is where Holloway and Brown could have reiterated the advantages of seeking to publish one's work during the doctoral process for proofreading and editing skills to be already developed. The authors stress again the importance of adhering strictly to individual institutional procedures. Holloway and Brown supply a list of possible questions for the oral examination, which makes this section quite possibly the most useful part of the book. As many dissertation defenses are closed affairs, mystery often surrounds the dissertation defense, and the sample questions provide reassurance regarding typical topics that one might face.

The authors offer some options for how doctoral dissertations could be disseminated, through journal articles, a book or book chapters, seminars and conferences, and non-traditional means such as theatrical performances, dance, and poetry, which may be highly suitable for particular subject areas. The section dealing with journal articles contains a useful checklist including many items also relevant to editing and preparing the dissertation for defense. The authors highlight how critique is part of the peer-review publishing process. It might have been useful here to instruct the student to learn not to take peer reviewers' comments too personally, as it is the work that is critiqued and not the individual. For the developing scholar, this outcome can be one of the hardest lessons to bear.

Overall, the title of the book suggests a focus upon the qualitative doctoral program rather than the dissertation writing process within the program. Though the book considers some broader aspects of the doctoral program, for example, the relationship between student and supervisor, the suggestion that it has relevance to all students writing their doctorates in English and in English speaking countries might be a stretch. For example, in Canada, doctoral programs typically include a selection of formally assessed courses and an expectation that students undertake teaching and research assistantships during their study periods (Austin, 2003; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988), and such aspects of a doctorate are excluded. Nevertheless, I believe that this book appeals, as the authors suggest, to readers considering a qualitative doctorate or students in the beginning stages of their programs. This book might also be useful

for faculty new to student supervision, given the authors attention to typical anxieties experienced by doctoral students. As for my own doctorate, I am comforted to find my program does indeed contain all of the essential elements and I appreciate Holloway and Brown's endorsement of the qualitative research doctorate.

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