

Rafael Mrowczynski

Andreas Witzel and Herwig Reiter. *The Problem-Centered Interview: Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2012. 216 p. ISBN 978-1-8492-0100-1.

Rafael Mrowczynski. Address for correspondence: National Research University–Higher School of Economics, Department of Sociology, Kochnovskii proezd, 3, office 216, Moscow, 125319, Russia. rmrowczynski@hse.ru.

Germany has a long and rich tradition of qualitative social research (QSR) in sociology and neighboring disciplines. Since the 1970s, several schools have been established in this rapidly developing field. Until quite recently, access to the vast part of the methodological literature that emerged in this context had been available only for those who read German. However, the situation has started to change in the last decade. There is a growing number of publications in English which introduce the methodological innovations of German-speaking social scientists to a much broader public (Flick, Kardoff, and Steinke 2004; Knoblauch, Flick, and Maeder 2005; Bohnsack, Pfaff, and Weller 2010).

The book reviewed in this article is one of these publications. It provides a comprehensive, methodologically well-founded, and at the same time practically oriented introduction to the Problem-Centered Interview (PCI) approach, which has been developed by one of the authors, Andreas Witzel, since the 1970s. The coauthor, Herwig Reiter, is a younger-generation scholar who has acquired extensive firsthand experience in using this interviewing method when working on his PhD thesis on the experiences of unemployment in postsocialist Lithuania. These details about the background of the authors are worth mentioning because one of the strongest aspects of the book is its consistent use of concrete examples to illustrate the different methodological steps and procedures proposed by the authors. These examples are taken from their original research projects and build “bridges” between the authors’ more abstract methodological ideas and their practical research recommendations.

The book starts with a methodological outline which makes clear that the ambition of its authors goes beyond a mere introduction of a data-gathering technique. Witzel and Reiter propose “the program of the PCI” which clearly positions them within methodological debates among German-speaking QSR scholars. On the one hand, they distance themselves from the approach of semistructured interviewing which aims at an extraction of factual information from respondents and which is supported by rigidly handled interview guides. On the other hand, they criticize the narrative-interview approach proposed by Fritz Schütze for its “radical *tabula rasa* attitude” as well as for its “exaggeration of the principles of openness and non-intervention” (30). Instead they propose a middle-ground attitude, which is described by the metaphor of a “well-informed traveller” (2, 19) who uses his or her prior knowledge about the issue under investigation as a kind of “general and rather dense

roadmap" (35), but who is at the same time mainly interested in learning something that questions and modifies his or her prior knowledge.

Most of the book is devoted to a detailed discussion of all consecutive methodological steps that allow a social scientist to achieve the goals outlined in the chapter on the methodological underpinning of the PCI technique. A particularly careful discussion is devoted to the issue of utilizing prior knowledge. It is common ground in most of the QSR literature that prior knowledge about a phenomenon under investigation, especially if it already exists in the form of scientific theories, bears the risk that the primary data will be merely subsumed by already preexisting theoretical concepts. Witzel and Reiter are well aware of this, but they also account for another significant problem which is less frequently addressed in the QSR discourse: Researchers without a conceptual "roadmap" that sensitizes them to certain issues in their field are overwhelmed by the diversity of their unstructured observations; they can easily get lost. For this reason, the authors recommend developing a "sensitizing framework." Such a framework helps the researcher to remain "problem-centered," in other words, focused on the "problem" under investigation, and to reflect on his or her own preconceptions inevitably brought into the field.

The centerpiece of the book is the chapter on the interviewing process itself. It systematically discusses all relevant aspects of gathering verbal data. The scope of issues which are raised here begins from the methodologically very important idea that the interviewing process itself is a "pre-interpretation" and not a "neutral" procedure of collecting empirical data which is analyzed only afterwards to practical aspects of "debriefing" of the respondent. The analysis of data collected by conducting PCIs is not the focus of the book. Nevertheless, this issue is also discussed in a way that gives the reader a clear idea about the analytical procedures preferred by the authors. Here, they strongly rely on the ideas steaming from the grounded theory methodology.

The reviewed book is highly recommendable to all social scientists who are interested in a practically oriented yet methodologically grounded handbook on an interviewing technique which is tailor-made for topically focused studies and for application in mixed method research contexts. It can be used as a step-by-step guide for all who plan to undertake a journey into uncharted territory as "well-informed travellers." Such a traveller will definitely need some other books to prepare his or her expedition, but this one will be very helpful when it comes to the key issue of generating primary data in interactions with "locals" who inhabit the social worlds under investigation.

REFERENCES

- Bohnsack, Ralf, Nicolle Pfaff, and Wivian Weller, eds. 2010. *Qualitative Analysis and Documentary Method in International Education Research*. Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Flick, Uwe, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke, eds. 2004. *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Knoblauch, Hubert, Uwe Flick, and Christoph Maeder. 2005. "Qualitative Methods in Europe: The Variety of Social Research." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6(3). Retrieved August 27, 2012 (<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503342>).