

Qualitative Research Methods – A Health Focus

Pranee Liamputtong Rice and Douglas Ezzy

Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, Victoria, 1999, x + 295pp., (paperback).

This superb book will be welcomed by students and health practitioners. In one short volume, Liamputtong Rice and Ezzy provide novice researchers with a scholarly and informative entrée into the rewarding yet challenging world of qualitative social science research.

From the outset, the authors make it clear that an ad hoc approach to the implementation of qualitative research methods simply will not do. Just as in the 'normative' paradigm, qualitative research must conform to a range of accepted standards and be capable of standing up to rigorous scrutiny. Hence the authors are to be particularly congratulated upon their effort to assist novice researchers meet the challenges associated with qualitative data 'collection', analysis and the construction of qualitative research proposals and reports. Whilst eyebrows may be raised at the notion of prescribing in advance the design of a qualitative research project after reading the chapter, I could appreciate why the authors had written it. If qualitative research is to be the equal of conventional research then success in the grant application game is necessary. As many appreciate, funding is difficult enough to secure using conventional methodology, let alone researchers planning to use for example, participatory action research in the research design. I think this chapter is important and I will certainly follow the advice provided.

The book has many other strengths, for example, the lucid discussion of the issues surrounding rigour, ethics and sampling in qualitative research, and the demonstration of the creative ways in which qualitative research methods can be applied to health issues, health policy making and the evaluation of health outcomes. The section dealing with the practice grounded theory in the analysis of qualitative data was very illuminating. However, as others have pointed out, care must be taken in using the grounded theory approach. In its desire to produce rigorous social science its proponents

have been accused of mixing nomothetic and idiographic concerns. Generalisation is not usually a characteristic of qualitative research. Another strength of the book is the well informed account of the benefits and disadvantages of using a computer program for data analysis. Having used an earlier version of the Ethnograph I could truly appreciate the comment quoted about its efficacy.

Following a brief introduction to its structure and rationale, the reader is immediately introduced to the philosophical and sociological traditions that have given rise to the qualitative research methods that are succinctly described and evaluated in later chapters. To the beginning researcher, 'post - positivist' research is beguiling in its simplicity. However, as I found, nothing could be further from the truth. It is when one comes to the point of actually 'doing' the empirical component of the research and analysing the data, that problems can arise. The realisation dawns that the task is made more difficult if the guiding precepts have been borrowed from a range of traditions without a comprehensive understanding of their purpose within the original intellectual tradition. Hence, I was delighted with the attempt made by the authors to assist the reader understand the theoretical perspective underpinning the various research methods.

The chapters dealing with the research methods chosen by the authors as being congruent with the philosophical and sociological traditions described in chapter 1 are excellent. These seven chapters use a similar style that includes key characteristics of the method and its rationale, associated data 'collection' techniques, examples of its use in health related research, together with an appraisal of its advantages and limitations. Each chapter ends with an instructive tutorial exercise. Besides dealing with more familiar methods of in-depth interviews, ethnography and focus groups the authors provide a good account of the more innovative and arguably more complex approaches of participatory action

research, unobtrusive methods, narrative analysis and life history and memory-work

Clearly in a work of this size there are omissions. The authors recognise this fact and provide the reader with additional references at the end of each chapter. However I do think a novice health researcher with experience only of classic medical experimental methodology or 'normative' social science survey methodology needs to be offered a more elaborated explanation of the basic ontological perspective of the 'interpretative' paradigm than is currently the case. We actually do not meet the term until much later in the book and then it is only as a reflective comment. The same could be said about the Critical Theory associated with Habermas. As someone who used the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism to make sense of the time I spent 'in the field', I also found the discussion about its metatheory a little disappointing. Perhaps it is worth noting too that Denzin, who is quoted extensively as an authority on the methodology, has long been criticised for replacing 'respect for the nature of the empirical world' with eclecticism and methods more appropriately associated with positivist social science research such as operationalisation and triangulation.

One must also take care with the transfer of the methodology of ethnography from anthropology to sociological qualitative research methodology guided by the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Fetterman, 1982). From the symbolic interactionist perspective associated

with the Chicago School, there is only one research method that is congruent with Blumer's (1969) arguments for the primacy of ontology over epistemology (Williams, 1976) namely participant observation in the context of a case study. Jorgenson's (1989) monograph dealing with this methodology would be a useful addition to the reading list. An excellent example of the use of symbolic interactionist theory in the analysis of qualitative data developed through use of in-depth interviews is Moorhouse (1992).

As the authors correctly point out the philosophical tradition of phenomenology has had a significant impact upon health research particularly within nursing. However, as Crotty (1996) has demonstrated it is very difficult to accomplish research that actually resembles an 'authentic' phenomenological account of a particular phenomenon. In their attempts to produce research concerned with exploring people's shared perceptions and meanings, many leading nurse researchers such as Benner and Diekelmann, are actually drawing upon the interactionist tradition associated with Blumer. Hence the theoretical account of phenomenology provided by the authors must be supplemented by additional reading. Phenomenological research is not as easy as it might appear to the naïve reader.

In conclusion I have no hesitation in recommending the book to budding researchers within the health professions. This department will certainly use it as a reference text within our undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

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A Certain Age: Women Growing Older

Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman (Eds.)

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Previous literature on the experience of ageing has often emphasised the negative aspects of growing older and has typically focussed on the lives of men. *A Certain Age* therefore makes a refreshing change, as it focuses on the experiences of women and adopts a generally positive perspective on ageing. The chapters are, in the main, based around the research projects of the authors and, as such, they are both timely and scholarly. Moreover, in contrast with some other research-based works they are also, in general, very readable.

The first three chapters, in Part 1: *Positioning*, provide a sound introduction to key issues relevant to all older people, including those of particular importance to older women. While most of these issues have been comprehensively discussed in previous publications, these chapters provide accessible and up to date summaries of the material and are enlivened by extracts from interviews with older women. The references in these chapters provide useful pointers for further reading. The final chapter of Part 1 contains Marilyn Guillemín's fascinating and revealing account of insights into women's experience of menopause gained through analysis of drawings.

The specialised chapters of Part 2: *Participating*, challenge the negative stereotypes of older women by portraying them as active in new learning, exercise, and work in the paid and the volunteer work-force. These chapters draw liberally on interview material and, in so doing, allow the voices of older women to be heard, as well as providing an invaluable insight into the varied activities and experiences discussed in these chapters.

Part 3: *Relating*, opens with a wonderful chapter that recounts a conversation between an older indigenous woman, Dot Peters, and the book's editors. There is much to be learned from Ms Peter's experiences and insights. Moreover, her general wisdom is inspirational and prompts a re-reading of other chapters from a new perspective. The following chapter, dealing with the experience of widowhood, is a beautifully crafted account of a research study that explored the lives and feelings of widows. It is not only moving and challenging, but also surprisingly

positive. The last chapter, dealing with love and intimacy in older age, is similarly confronting and uplifting.

Overall, *A Certain Age* is an exciting and important contribution to the gerontological literature. While some of the chapters are more novel and interesting than others, each is an integral part of the book's cohesion and comprehensiveness. *A Certain Age* will be of interest and value to students, professionals who provide services or develop policies for older people, as well as anyone else with a general interest the experience of ageing well. Indeed, it would seem a useful book to which health professionals could refer their older clients, many of whom are interested in learning about the experiences of their peers and the research studies currently being conducted with older people.

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