

Qualitative Research in Health: An introduction

By Carol Grbich

Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1999, iii+312 pp., \$45.00 (Paperback)

Grbich's book is well written. Her use of clear and precise language makes the text easy to read and understand. The book contains many accounts of the author's own research as well as practical examples of other studies which make points clearly. Definitions of qualitative jargons are succinct throughout the book. The book does not overemphasise the author's personal views on preferred methods. Her strategy has been to take "an even-handed approach to allow the readers to make their own decisions as to the appropriateness of each approach" (p. vii). The book comprises four parts. Each part consists of chapters that follow the general order of the research process. Part One focuses on Theory and Design and introduces qualitative research, the historical trends, and the ongoing qualitative versus quantitative debate in the first chapter. The second chapter addresses theories in research and the approaches to the use of theoretical perspectives. The work of theorists such as Marx, Durkheim, Parsons and Foucault as well as Mead, Goffman, Weber and Habermas are all discussed in relation to today's health researchers. Criticisms of each theorist are also presented in this chapter. Postmodern/poststructuralist and feminist research is also explained along with its methodological implications and criticisms. The chapter may be too heavy for novice researchers, but it is essential for a more advanced understanding of qualitative methodology.

Chapter Three focuses on Research design issues and looks at Objectivity, Validity and Reliability. Grbich explains that the issues of "objectivity", "subjectivity", "validity", "reliability", "generalisability", "sampling", and ethics and accountability, have all generated debate over the past 400 years and have offered the varied opinions on this continuing debate. She goes on to explain that "the questioning of the terms 'objectivity', 'validity' and 'reliability' has polarised positions between those who have emphasised the importance of rigorous qualitative research and those who regard 'rigour' as inappropriate" (p. 61). Sampling techniques are discussed and Grbich argues how they have been "de-emphasised" with "the advent of uncertainty, chaos, postmodernism and poststructuralism". The issue of ethics is explored. Grbich emphasises its importance, particularly when working with "vulnerable people and children" as well as when observing "those on the margins of society" (p. 80).

Part Two of the book focuses on Techniques of Data Collection which covers interviewing procedures, design, and structures such as person-to-person and person-to-group. Participant observation and researcher roles are explored in detail. This chapter highlights the issues surrounding participant observation and the factors that each researcher must consider, and those that might impact on the data and the setting under observation. The advantages of interviewing and participant observation are explained and, as Grbich explains, "dictate when and how each technique or process will be used" (p. 119).

Part Three of the book focuses on several methodologies that have been used frequently in health research. Library-based methods are explored and the strengths and weaknesses of personal and impersonal documentation, historical method, and

discourse analysis are conveyed. Chapter six deals with field-based methods, which include an analysis of each of ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, oral biography, memory work and case studies. Again, advantages and disadvantages are provided along with practical examples. Chapter eight deals with action-based methods including evaluation and action research.

Part Four deals with interpretation, analysis and presentation of data. Chapter nine focuses on interpretation and analysis with all its complexities. Grbich outlines the major issues affecting interpretation and also reviews the four ideal modes of qualitative data analysis. Computer-assisted analysis, which is becoming increasingly popular for qualitative research, is discussed in chapter ten. Grbich reviews each software package and discusses the issues surrounding them including their features and limitations. The comprehensive list of software packages also includes the address of distributors, which is useful. Grbich warns us that there are many concerns surrounding the software packages and that many researchers question their usefulness and effect on qualitative data (p. 256). She explains that ultimately "the single most important thing to remember is that the final process of interpretative analysis rests with the researcher" (p. 257).

The final chapter concentrates on the presentation of data and of qualitative research findings. Grbich argues that the form of presentation will be dependent on the intended audience, the researcher's position and "the styles which enhance the purpose of research" (p. 259). In this chapter Grbich engages in various styles of writing including poetry, anecdotes, pastiche, vignettes, visual, aural and interactive presentations as well as quotes of interview data. Grbich emphasises the importance of language when writing up research. She maintains that it should be "non-discriminatory, non-stereotypical, inclusive, neutral, equal and consistent" (p. 274). The need to be "politically correct" is paramount. The chapter ended with some useful points about what a "worthy" piece of qualitative research would contain at the "conservative" end of the spectrum as well as from the "postmodernism" perspective (p. 276).

The book is very user-friendly. References are up-to-date and have been applied very well, particularly when used as examples. Each part of the book began with an introduction about its chapters. The chapters were easy to follow and sequential and ended with a summary. A comprehensive list of references was provided.

The book is a very valuable reference for researchers in health. It is suited to both academics teaching students on qualitative health research, as well as for students who are interested in qualitative research analysis.

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Handbook of Women's Health: An Evidence-based Approach

Ann Rosenfeld (Ed.)

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The Handbook of Women's Health is a practical handbook providing comprehensive evidence-based guides to providing care for women. The handbook focuses primarily on preventative health care and well-woman care throughout the life cycle of a woman. Chapters in the book cover many issues relating to women's health: from sexuality, contraception, pregnancy, and other psychological to medical conditions. A central concern of this handbook, or as Rosenfeld claims, its strength, is with evidence underlying best practice women's health care. Hence, throughout the handbook, epidemiological evidence is cited and there are checklists highlighting women's health problems and effective evidence-based treatment.

The book comprises 33 chapters in seven main sections. The first chapter, titled "singular health care of women", discusses women's health in relation to research. The author includes historical accounts of the exclusion and marginalisation of women's health in health research, and articulates new guidelines for research concerning women. The chapter then focuses on the discussion about societal and biological differences between men and women that may affect women's health.

The first section of the handbook focuses on preventative health care. In this section, preventative care of women from different age groups including adolescents, adults, and older women, is included. The other chapters in this section discuss issues relating to cigarette smoking, nutrition, and exercise. The second section is on psychosocial health of well women through the life cycle. It is rather disappointing to see that there is only one such chapter in this section, and for the whole handbook for that matter.

Section three focuses on sexuality. It includes chapters on sexual dysfunction, contraception, infertility, and medical care in pregnancy. Sexual health of lesbian patients—a positive aspect of this book—is also included in this section. Section four includes chapters on genitourinary medicine. Several health problems of women through the life cycle such as menstrual disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, vaginitis, chronic pelvic pain, endometrial cancer and postmenopausal bleeding, ovarian cancer and urinary incontinence, are discussed.

Section five deals with breast disorders and, in two chapters, on benign breast disorders and breast cancer screening. The following section is devoted to psychological disorders. Woman battering, rape, depression and premenstrual syndrome, addiction and eating disorders are chapters comprising this section. Although the focus is on psychological health, medical conditions and treatments are also discussed in these chapters. The final section of the handbook is on common medical problems of women. The section include chapters on coronary

heart disease, diabetes mellitus type II, thyroid disorders, hypertension and stroke, and osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

It is noted that the contributors to the book come mainly from a biomedical background. This may be due to the fact that the handbook is intended to target clinicians rather than non-clinical readers. (There are few academics whose work deals with women's health issues.)

The handbook has its weak points. Rosenfeld claims that the book pays attention to the cultural, social and psychological differences that have an impact on the health of women. I find that the book gives more attention to the psychological differences rather than social differences. Social issues such as class background and ethnicity are presented scantily and only in some chapters. As a whole, the book has its focus on a biomedical aspect of women's health.

The book deals largely with women's health in the United States. Although some brief comments and statistics from international perspectives are included in some chapters, there is a heavy bias towards developed countries such as the USA and the UK. This is not too surprising as all contributors are from the USA. Women's health concerns in underdeveloped countries are largely neglected in this volume. The book does, however, pay some attention to "Other" women such as women of immigrant backgrounds, and women of low socioeconomic backgrounds. There is brief mention of these women in some chapters, but there is little information about their health.

I find the handbook rather dry. The writing style is clearly of a handbook nature. Each chapter begins with a short statement of the background of the area. This follows with sub-headings, but all the information discussed is presented in a point form. It is frustrating to read such a book, as it does not allow a smooth flow from the beginning to the end. This pattern is consistent throughout the book. On the one hand, the editor has done a good job in presenting a consistent format in her book. On the other hand the book is too rigid in its present format.

Overall, this book is informative and of value to health professionals who provide health care for women, including general practitioners, nurses, and specialists who practice primary care of women. It is also of value to students in nursing and medicine who undertake courses on women and health.

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