

Ritchie, J. and Lewis, J. (eds.) (2003) **Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers**. Sage Publications, London (336 pages).

Reviewed by: *Stine B. Christiansen*, Ph.D.-student, Bioethics, The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University.

The book edited by Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis is written by a team of practising researchers from the current and past staff of the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research, Britain's largest independent social research organisation. The book is intended for those working in applied policy fields as well as those concerned with the development of social theory more generally. The book documents the practice of qualitative research, both for those who are embarking on studies for the first time and for those who want to gain further understanding of methodological principles. The reader is taken on a guided tour of the whole qualitative research process from the planning stages, through data collection and analysis to reporting of results.

In chapter 1 Dawn Snape and Liz Spencer present the foundations of qualitative research. They begin with a brief history of qualitative research, its traditions and philosophical underpinnings. They describe the development of qualitative research as well as different traditions and approaches to qualitative research, including concepts such as "interpretivism", "positivism", "ontology" and "epistemology". They point out that a number of different "schools" have emerged (e.g. ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory), and stress that there is no single right way of doing qualitative research, but rather the methods chosen reflect a mix of philosophy, research objective etc. Thus, while clarifying their own positions and approaches the authors at the same time emphasise, that the reader must consider and decide for him or herself which ways are most relevant to their own particular research.

In chapter 2 Jane Ritchie lists an array of applications of qualitative methods to social research including their strengths and weaknesses. She describes a broad classification of different functions of research, e.g. contextual, explanatory, evaluative and generative, as well as the role played by qualitative research in each of these functions. She divides the approaches to collecting qualitative data into two groups – naturally occurring data (e.g. observation) and generated data (e.g. interviews), and explains how the different approaches will yield data of different kinds and be suitable for different research purposes. Finally, she makes a point of not only paying attention to different kinds of qualitative research, but also to consider the potential for combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods keeping in mind that each offers different kinds of knowledge and cannot be expected to replicate each other.

In chapter 3 Jane Lewis deals with various design issues. She points out that in qualitative research, the research design is a continuing process where flexibility should allow study

design, theory and data collection to inform and be informed by each other. She considers the use of comparison (e.g. control groups), case studies and longitudinal research, including their implications for analysis. She continues by describing design issues such as the practicalities and ethics of how to get access to private individuals (e.g. the setting, informed consent and confidentiality). Finally, she provides a list of the planning issues relating to different project stages indicating which chapters of the book to consult for more information.

In chapter 4 Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis and Gillian Elam take up designing and selecting samples. They explain the concept of sampling in qualitative research - purposive samples - where samples are selected on criteria such as diversity and symbolic representation. Furthermore, attention is paid to issues such as sample sizes, information sources from which the sample is selected (sample frames) and the use of a sample matrix.

In chapter 5 Sue Arthur and James Nazroo introduce the designing of fieldwork strategies and materials. They present the points to consider in the construction and use of a topic guide in fieldwork. They emphasise that although the guide ensures some consistency in fieldwork approaches, it should be used with flexibility and thus allow the researcher to be responsive to the fieldwork situation. The principles for structuring the guide, e.g. the length and style, are explained and related to various research purposes. Finally, they explain the use of techniques such as the use of vignettes (short hypothetical stories) or card-sorting.

In chapter 6 Robin Legard, Jill Keegan and Kit Ward present in-depth interviews. After describing the purpose and role of the researcher at different interview stages, they move on to a presentation of types of questions, e.g. questions to achieve breadth and depth (content mapping questions and content mining questions), and formulation of questions (broad, narrow, leading and clear questions). Furthermore, they describe some of the ways in which the researcher can assist the relationship with the participant during the interview, and the strategies to consider when conducting sensitive interviews. Also, various practical considerations are mentioned.

In chapter 7 Helen Finch and Jane Lewis deal with focus groups. They explore the features of focus groups and describe different types of focus groups. They then look at the group process and the stages that moderating a group discussion involves as well as the task for the researcher within each stage. Furthermore, they consider the researchers' role, e.g. controlling the discussion and balance between individuals. Finally, they present issues relating to group composition and size, and the practicalities when organising a focus group including a checklist.

In chapter 8 Liz Spencer, Jane Ritchie and William O'Connor introduces the foundations of analysis: the practices, principles and processes. They describe different approaches to and practices of analysis and how these vary with e.g. epistemological assumptions and the main focus of the analysis. They present the functions offered by computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, but emphasise that these should only be seen as support for the process of analysis and not as a replacement for the intellectual role of the researcher. They go through

the necessary key features of analytic models to maximise the potential for a full and reflective analysis, and finally describe the structure of stages and processes involved in analysis (the analytical hierarchy).

In chapter 9 Jane Ritchie, Liz Spencer and William O'Connor consider in more detail the forms of analysis that might be undertaken when carrying out qualitative analysis. They provide a more thorough description of the stages and processes involved in the analytical hierarchy and use one computer software package, Framework, to illustrate how to aid the analytic process through all its key stages. The description of data management covers identification of themes or concepts, labelling of data, sorting and synthesising the data, and continues to establishing of typologies, detection of patterns and development of explanations. Furthermore, the authors address additional features that need to be considered when data have been collected through group discussion.

In chapter 10 Jane Lewis and Jane Ritchie discuss the issue of generalising from qualitative research. In recognition of differences between writers on this issue they devote the chapter to a clarification of the circumstances under which they believe the findings of qualitative research can be generalised. They discuss definitions of generalisation in the context of qualitative research, which leads on to a discussion of validity and reliability and their relationship with generalisation. Finally the authors present some key principles to be borne in mind when generalising from qualitative data.

In chapter 11 Clarissa White, Kandy Woodfield and Jane Ritchie explore issues concerning reporting and presenting qualitative data. They emphasise that the reporting task is not simply an act of recording the outcome of the analysis but also an active construction and representation of the form and nature of the phenomena being explored. They discuss the main challenges faced when writing up research findings and the different forms of research output that might be considered. They then move on to a description of the main issues to consider when preparing a written report, including a discussion on the use of different forms of analytic output. The end of the chapter is devoted to oral presentations.

Throughout the book the authors make good use of various aids to facilitate the understanding of the often complex issues. There is an ample use of boxes and tables where key issues are presented, compared and contrasted in bullet point form which makes it easier to get an overview of the issues addressed. Also, lots of examples are used throughout the book to illustrate theories, differences in approaches etc., making the explanations less abstract. Furthermore, at the end of each chapter a summary is given of the key points that have been covered followed by a description of the key terms used and a list of texts recommended for further reading. Finally, the language is clear and easy to read - even for a non-native speaker and newcomer to the field of qualitative research.

The density of information in the text is generally very high, the obvious compromise being that many issues are just mentioned briefly, and to some - more knowledgeable - readers the book may therefore appear superficial at times. The ambition of the book is, however, to be a

guide and thus the authors are right to maintain this overview perspective. Readers in need of further information are not left unattended - plenty of references are provided throughout the text in addition to the recommendations for further reading at the end of each chapter.

The book is an excellent introduction to the theoretical, methodological and practical issues of qualitative research. The authors do not pretend that carrying out qualitative research is an easy task, but they make it more accessible, because they deal with issues at all stages of the research in a very direct, clear, systematic and practical manner and thus make the processes involved in qualitative research more transparent. With this approach the authors successfully remove any atmosphere of mystery around data obtained through qualitative research methods. The book is highly recommendable for researchers from other academic disciplines wanting to engage in qualitative research and students new to qualitative research, and it is no doubt a potential source of inspiration for more experienced qualitative researchers as well.