

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

Edited by RITCHE, LEWIS, McNAUGHTON NICHOLS & ORMSTON



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

A GUIDE FOR SOCIAL
SCIENCE STUDENTS AND
RESEARCHERS

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*Gratefully dedicated to Roger Jowell and Norman Glass, without
whose vision and spirited support the seeds of this book
would not have blossomed.*

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

NatCen Social Research (the National Centre for Social Research) is one of Britain's largest and leading independent social research organisations. It was established in 1969 and is registered as a non-profit, independent educational charity. NatCen Social Research has a staff of over 250 and offices in Edinburgh (ScotCen Social Research), London and Essex. It carries out quantitative and qualitative research across all major social policy areas, with a focus on five key substantive themes: children and young people, society and social change, crime and justice, health and well-being, and income and work. NatCen Social Research specialises in the development and application of rigorous social research methods, with work commissioned by central government departments, public bodies, and funded by research councils and grant-giving foundations. NatCen Learning disseminates this expertise via short courses provided to external organisations and researchers working in government, academia and other settings.

In 1985 a specialist **Qualitative Research Unit (QRU)** was established within NatCen Social Research, which was at the forefront of developing high-quality qualitative methods for social and public policy research. Since 2010, rather than forming a specialist methodological unit, qualitative research experts at NatCen Social Research are based within one of the five substantive research teams outlined above. Qualitative researchers at NatCen Social Research continue to be committed to high-quality applied qualitative research. At the same time, qualitative work evolves to reflect changing landscapes, such as the advent of new digital and online technology, and the increasing use of participatory methods and community engagement.

All the authors are current or past staff members of NatCen Social Research and are committed to the capability and advancement of qualitative social research.

Editors

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EDITORS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone whose contribution to the second edition of *Qualitative Research Practice* has made it possible, and particularly the team from SAGE, for their continuing support, Natalie Jago, Linda Maynard and Catherine O'Donnell from NatCen Social Research, and Liz Spencer for her extensive contribution to both editions.

EDITORS' PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When the first edition of this book was published in 2003, we hoped that we were filling a gap in the market for an accessible textbook that provided detail of how you actually do qualitative research as well as describing its theoretical foundations. A recurrent theme from people who attended our qualitative research training courses was that they would like more practical advice. How do you actually put together a coherent topic guide? How do you design and select an effective sample? Once you have several hundred pages of interview data, what steps do you take to manage this? And what steps are involved in analysing this data and turning your findings into evidence that will stand up to external scrutiny? While many textbooks covered the theory of qualitative research and general approaches to conducting it, it seemed that there were relatively few that delved into the nitty gritty of these questions – that is, how do you carry out qualitative research in practice? The response to the first edition of the book over the last decade has given us reason to believe that we were at least partially successful in meeting this need. In updating the book, we remain committed to documenting the practices of qualitative research as well as the range of approaches it encompasses.

Our target audience is early career researchers or those new to research, although we hope that more seasoned qualitative practitioners will also find useful inspiration within its pages. The book is intended for researchers from all sectors (universities, government and public services, research institutes and agencies, etc.) and for those working on theoretical studies as well as those doing contract or grant-funded research. In terms of context, the authors of this book are all current or former researchers from NatCen Social Research, one of Britain's leading independent social research centres. NatCen's work has a practical, applied focus, aimed at better understanding society and informing and evaluating public policy. So while we hope that much of what the book has to say about robust qualitative practice will also be relevant to those whose research has purely theoretical aims, we expect that the advice in these pages will be particularly useful for those working on research that focuses on developing or evaluating policy and practice.

The authors who have contributed to this book have drawn on their own experiences of working on qualitative studies as a central part of their everyday work to explain and illustrate the principles of robust qualitative research practice. The ability to conduct and analyse face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus groups remains central to this work for most of our authors. An internal NatCen review of the methods used across 86 studies published by 6 UK Government departments over ten months in 2012 (Jago, forthcoming) found that 52 studies which used qualitative methods included in-depth interviews, while 22 also included focus groups. Use of observation and other methods of data collection was far less common. Although the methods available to qualitative researchers are wide-ranging and constantly expanding, we believe that the ability to design and conduct high-quality interview-based studies remains a core part of the qualitative research skill set, particularly (though not exclusively) for those working on applied studies. We acknowledge that this position is not uncontroversial – Silverman, for example, has questioned the extensive use of interviewing in qualitative research (see discussion in Chapter 7). However, we believe that, particularly for researchers with an interest in evaluating public policy, seeking the views and experiences of those affected by policy remains essential and interviewing remains a key tool for doing this. Thus while we cover a variety of additional methods in somewhat more detail in this second edition, we continue to give particular emphasis to data generated through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

In producing this second edition of the book, we have been acutely conscious of recent developments both in our own practice and among the wider qualitative research community. The practice of qualitative research has inevitably evolved over the last decade, and in this new edition we reflect on what we see as some of the key issues, including:

- the increase in interest in Participatory Action Research and peer research
- the increasing salience of online communication and the application of this to qualitative research
- the greater use of visual methods and techniques
- the use of observational methods – while there is a tradition of observation going back to the very beginnings of qualitative research, we argue that its use in more applied, policy-focused research is still developing
- the increased use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software packages and the further developments in their applications and capabilities since the early 2000s, and
- the greater scrutiny (and proliferation of associated guidance) relating to qualitative research ethics.

We cover some of these issues in more detail than others. For example, we have added completely new chapters on observation and on ethics, reflecting on the challenges

of deciding how to apply general ethical principles and guidance in practice. Other developments (such as online research and participatory approaches) are incorporated as part of existing chapters. For more detail on these new or developing methods, we refer the reader to the many excellent texts written by experts in these fields.

In addition to updating the content of the book to reflect recent developments in qualitative research, we have also taken the opportunity to revisit and (we hope) improve the original text. All of the chapters have been restructured, revised and expanded in places to further clarify our thinking about how to do rigorous qualitative research and to reflect current practice. Throughout the book, we have updated the examples included to illustrate the principles and processes described, drawing primarily on more recent studies conducted by the authors or by other NatCen researchers. We have also revisited the summaries of key points that conclude each chapter and our recommendations for further reading. Where appropriate, these recommendations now include references to resources which are available online, alongside hard copies of textbooks and resources that we have found particularly helpful in producing the second edition of this book.

In his excellent *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (2009), Flick notes two major problems faced by authors of introductory qualitative research textbooks:

First, the alternatives summarized under the label of qualitative research are still very heterogeneous. Therefore such introductions run the risk of giving a unified presentation to an issue which is and will remain rather diverse ... Second, introductions to methods might obscure instead of highlight the idea that qualitative research is not merely an application of methods in the sense of technologies. It is not only the tension of technique and art in the methods, but also the inclusion in qualitative research of a specific research attitude. (2009: 462)

These are tensions with which we, as editors and authors, have grappled in drafting both the first and second editions of this book. In relation to the former, we readily acknowledge that there are many philosophies and forms of qualitative research. A brief overview of these is given in Chapter 1 by way of context for subsequent chapters. We would urge those picking up this book for the first time to read the final section of that first chapter, in which we outline our own approach to qualitative research. This emphasises our commitment to realism, argues that qualitative research can, and should, be conducted in a manner that stands up to external scrutiny, and outlines our view that qualitative studies can be used to draw wider inferences about the nature of the social world. We hope that Chapter 1 will help readers decide whether or not our particular position and the advice that follows from it is relevant to their research. But we encourage the reader to remain sensitive to the fact that there are many ways of doing qualitative research, to which it is not possible to do justice in a single volume.

Flick's second point reflects the often repeated view that the best qualitative research is a blend of method and art. Our own view, as outlined in the preface

to the first edition of this book, is that qualitative research is a blend of empirical investigation and creative discovery. Properly executed, qualitative research is a skilled craft that brings unique understanding of people's lives, yet built within an appropriate orientation. We hope that readers will approach the practical advice in this book with the openness, creativity and curiosity that enables qualitative researchers to practice their craft effectively.

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