

INTRODUCING OUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Student's Guide

Rosaline Barbour



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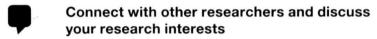
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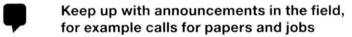
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About the author

Rosaline (Rose) Barbour is Prof of Health Care at the Open University. She is a Medical Sociologist with some 40 years' experience of conducting qualitative research, focusing on the intersection between the social and the clinical, spanning a range of substantive topic areas. She has published extensively in methodological journals, and has a particular interest in the rigour of qualitative research. She is joint editor (with Jenny Kitzinger) of *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice* (1999); London: Sage and is the author of *Doing Focus Groups* (Book 4 of the SAGE Qualitative Methods Kit) published in 2008 and since translated into Portuguese, Polish and Mandarin. Rose has also achieved international recognition for her qualitative methods workshops, which she has been running for nearly 30 years and which provide the basis for much of the material included in this book. Currently, she is focusing on re-examining the division between applied and theoretically-driven research.

Preface

Five years is a long time in the world of qualitative research; the landscape has shifted and a number of significant debates have raged. Consequently, the first edition of this book (published in 2008) requires substantial updating. In the time that has elapsed since then, qualitative research has been embraced by an ever-expanding number of constituencies, each of which has brought its own disciplinary concerns and methodological assumptions to bear in shaping how observational fieldwork, ethnographies, interviews, and focus groups – or combinations of these – have been employed. This relates not just to methods used for generating qualitative data, but, also, to approaches to analysis and the use that is made of a seemingly-endless array of potential theoretical frameworks.

There is, it is argued, much to be gained from taking a look at qualitative research practice in all its diversity. This provides a significant challenge, but the accompanying website (a new feature of the current edition) allows a wide range of supplementary materials to be made available to the reader and thus, allows the book to aspire to coverage that would not be possible in a single printed volume. Since Sage is a major publisher of methodological journals and textbooks, this imprint affords the opportunity to provide direct links, via the companion website, to most of the significant papers and book chapters that are cited. The new edition accords space to considering the use to which qualitative methods have been put in fields as diverse as anthropology, business studies, education, geography, health services research, media studies, nursing, organizational research, political science, psychology, social work, and sociology. Examples of such usages are provided throughout, with coverage extended to include topics such as institutional ethnography, critical discourse analysis, elite interviews and media analysis (not explored in depth in the previous edition). It is hoped that these highlighted exemplars make for stimulating reading, since they encompass a wide variety of topics - ranging from ADHD, architects at work, bullying and cyber-bullying, through to probation, social work practice (including the social construction of records), the work of tour guides, and research carried out in a war zone. The new edition provides an overview of qualitative research practice in its many forms and critically reviews both commonalities and differences, and, in particular, examines claims to distinctiveness and/or superiority.

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Matters of epistemology (ideas about knowledge and the nature of evidence) and ontology (ideas about what constitutes the social world and how this can be studied) – and the debates between 'realism' and 'constructivism'/relativism' – and their relevance for qualitative research practice are discussed at length (see Chapter 2). A case is made for a broadly 'social constructionist' approach, whereby it is possible to combine a 'constructivist epistemology' with a 'realist ontology'.

In the last few years online research (including the use of social media) and visual methods has blossomed. Research showcased and reviewed here covers, for example, the use of Facebook for sampling, a cyber-ethnography of an online diaspora, online interviewing, photo-elicitation in various contexts, and a video and interview study of family Christmases. This has served to highlight some perennial issues, regarding trustworthiness and authenticity of data; to introduce some new challenges (not least the sheer volume of potential data 'out there'); and to raise specific ethical issues (with regard to anonymity, confidentiality, representation, and public access to data and findings). The new edition includes an additional chapter that covers document analysis, online research and visual methods and Chapter 4, on Ethics, has been extended to consider how best researchers can anticipate and respond to the issues raised by emergent technologies and data-generating possibilities.

Mixed methods research – particularly applications which combine quantitative and qualitative methods – has, meantime, emerged as a 'movement' – some have even argued a 'paradigm' in its own right, with 'paradigm wars' (between quantitative and qualitative camps) a thing of the past – at least in some quarters. This new edition summarizes progress in mixed methods research, while considering the challenges ahead – not least, the potential for resurgence – if not of full-blown 'paradigm wars', then, at least the potential for re-invoking of unhelpful dichotomies, or importing of unhelpful and inappropriate assumptions. Consideration is also given to the challenges involved in seeking to combine different qualitative methods and the role played here by the various disciplinary heritages that are involved. The principles of successful research design are revisited and extended sections on case studies and reasons for seeking to combine methods emphasize that, as always, having a clear rationale – for choices and a plan specifying sequencing of methods and how these can inform each other – pays dividends.

The analysis section has been revised to cover frame analysis, narrative analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis (and critical/Foucauldian discourse analysis), alongside discussion of grounded theory and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A case is made for revisiting thematic analysis as the basis for developing composite approaches, which allow the researcher to draw on a number of disparate, but potentially enlightening strategies that have been developed and employed in different fields. Detailed examples are provided of different approaches to analysis in action, which also illuminate the

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ways in which different theoretical frameworks shape the process and focus of analysis. Again, the accompanying website affords the opportunity to present examples of work in progress (including sampling strategies, successive iterations of coding frames) which have kindly been made available by several former PhD students. These, together with the accompanying text and exemplars drawn from many different disciplinary and theoretical constituencies aim to de-mystify the processes involved in the qualitative research endeavour, while not detracting from its variety and vitality. This supplementary material also covers the process of writing and a new section provides guidance on writing a thesis, paying attention to the functions of the constituent chapters.

Rosaline S. Barbour Aberdeenshire

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I would like to express my gratitude to my many workshop attendees (from the UK, Europe and North America) and to my PhD students – both past and present – who have frequently asked difficult questions, prompting me to reconsider my own research practice and advice dispensed. I am also indebted to several such individuals for agreeing to retrospectively share their own work in progress and their insights, in order, hopefully, to make the process more transparent for others.

Companion website

Rosaline Barbour's *Introducing Qualitative Research*, second edition is supported by a companion website. Visit www.sagepub.co.uk/barbour2e to take advantage of the learning resources available for students.

Student resources include:

- Additional exercises to accompany each chapter of the book.
- Further reading: suggested journal articles relevant to the online exercises.
- Potential research questions to help students who are new to the field of research.
- Useful templates including timetables, matrix grids and interview schedules.
- Web links to help you with your qualitative research project.
- **Example transcripts:** real-life focus group transcript excerpts and accompanying commentaries.



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Overview

Publishers routinely ask prospective authors to stipulate the intended audience for their texts, and, given the growing acceptability of and interest in qualitative methods, there are many constituencies to which you, the reader, may belong. You may have been trained in a discipline that has traditionally utilized qualitative methods, so that this appears a natural and logical progression for you. Your interest may derive from your involvement as a practitioner who considers that qualitative methods are the most promising in terms of addressing the questions you wish to ask. Depending on the profession to which you belong you may be following in the footsteps of established qualitative researchers or you may be a pioneer in your particular field. You may simply want to carry out research through engaging with people rather than administering instruments. Finally, you may see yourself as essentially a quantitative researcher but one who wishes to extend their set of skills. Whatever your motivation in seeking to engage with qualitative methods, paying some attention to the historical and philosophical context is likely to pay dividends in terms of leading to an enhanced understanding and more thoughtful, considered research practice. Rather than taking claims about qualitative research at face value, or resorting to slavishly following the template provided by a specific approach, this book sets out to guide you through the various debates, equipping you to critically appraise claims and potential, in order to help you to make realistic and rewarding choices.

Until relatively recently qualitative research was the preserve of a fairly small number of 'consenting academics' usually working within sociology or anthropology. Consequently, qualitative research was more or less confined to exploring the theoretical concerns of these disciplines. There has, however, been a sea change over the past 20 years or so, as qualitative research has rapidly established itself. In particular, researchers in education and social work have embraced qualitative methods – which is, perhaps, not surprising, given their reliance on interaction as a key component of professional practice. Alongside the development of 'critical psychology' the discipline of psychology has moved from its previous reliance on experimental research design to engage with qualitative methods. Notably psychology has assembled its own qualitative 'toolkit' – and terminology, including Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (discussed in more

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detail in **Chapter 12**). The extent of the enthusiasm for qualitative methods is apparent in the appearance of new journals, including *Qualitative Social Work* launched in 2002, and *Qualitative Research in Psychology* which made its appearance in 2004. The *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* has been in existence since 2006.

Although slower to adopt qualitative methods, disciplines such as political science (Rathbun, 2008) and human geography can now count many qualitative researchers within their ranks. With this new focus many political scientists and human geographers have also extended their gaze to engage with other theoretical frameworks derived from adjacent disciplines, but giving these their own slant and, thereby, invigorating their own disciplines (see, for example, human geography's recent move to focus on emotion and space discussed in Chapter 7 - which has also involved embracing ethnographic methods). Multidisciplinary influences have always been part and parcel of the practice of business studies research, but, here too, qualitative methods have found an enthusiastic reception, as evidenced by the appearance, in 2006, of Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal. Notwithstanding the relatively new emphasis on evidence-based medicine, even the bastion of medical research has embraced qualitative methods and has sought to develop its own way of capitalizing on the insights afforded. Several funding streams, which previously privileged quantitative research, now require researchers to include a qualitative component in their research designs and proposals. Not only have established journals started to accept more qualitative papers; The International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being was set up in 2006 and Qualitative Health Research has been in existence since 1991.

The backdrop against which these shifting affiliations occur is, itself, also in a constant state of flux, as what is covered by qualitative research expands and mutates. Even since the first edition of this book was published in 2008, we have witnessed the burgeoning of online research (including work relying on social media), and visual methods (discussed in **Chapter 8**), together with some interesting developments in terms of longitudinal qualitative research (discussed in **Chapter 7**).

When I embarked on my postgraduate studies in the late 1970s there was not the huge number of textbooks which have since proliferated. Although Glaser and Strauss had published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967 this had not yet attained the 'cult status' it now enjoys and was presented as a set of ideas which might be helpful but which need not be slavishly followed. With the exception of the Glaser and Strauss text, I resorted, as a graduate student, to seeking out the few methodological commentaries provided in the anthropological literature and those produced by members of the Chicago School, as methodological texts *per se* were yet to be embraced as a viable genre.

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The intervening years have seen a seemingly endless supply of qualitative methods texts. Indeed, the irony of making such a comment while adding to this list of titles has not escaped me. While textbooks are a valuable resource, today's novice qualitative researcher is certainly spoilt for choice. New researchers are frequently daunted by the sheer volume and diversity of texts, each making a convincing, even compelling, case for following a particular set of techniques, while not always successfully demonstrating the distinctiveness of the favoured approach. Students from disciplines such as nursing or social work (the relative newcomers to academic research in general and qualitative research in particular) are those most likely to be affected by this sort of crisis of confidence, which often leads to them scouring the methodological literature for the 'right' approach on which to hang their study - whether this be 'hermeneutics', 'phenomenology', 'ethnomethodology' or 'discourse analysis' (to name but a few of the terms I have heard students invoke as they wrestle with developing their own studies). Although reading widely can be a good thing it can also immobilize students, who frequently find themselves torn between equally persuasive texts. Reflecting on my own experience of being thrown in at the deep end, there is a lot to be said for learning throughout the process of doing research. Delaying entry to the field until one is 'ready' and 'adequately prepared' carries the risk of the researcher becoming suspended indefinitely in indecision, forever falling short of that unattainable goal.

My justification for producing yet another qualitative methods textbook is that it aims to bridge that gap by providing a vicarious apprenticeship. Qualitative research is presented as a 'craft skill' (Seale, 1999) located midway between esoteric theorizing and mechanistic application of method. Based on a tried and tested workshop format, this book should provide a resource to illuminate the 'black box' of how individuals actually go about doing research. By means of multiple examples and exercises (presented both in the text and on the accompanying website), the reader will be able to access and engage with a wide range of practical and conceptual processes at different stages of research projects. I have drawn heavily on my own research experience and there is more to this than the usual academic vanity. It is only with regard to one's own work that one is qualified to speak of the gap between the everyday experience of doing research and the polished accounts that are eventually published - the knowledge of the reasoning behind the choices made, recall of fieldwork dilemmas, piecing together how arguments were built up (either by painstaking interrogation of the data, serendipitous insights or a combination of the two) and the things that are left out along the way. I am also indebted to several former PhD students, who have provided illuminating examples drawn from their own 'work in progress', accompanied, in some instances, with short commentaries (see the website). I am also grateful to colleagues who have provided, for the website, examples which illustrate the capacity of various computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) packages.

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Book outline

Although qualitative research is characterized by an iterative rather than linear model, the book addresses the various stages involved in the qualitative research process: formulating a research question, constructing a research design, developing schedules/**topic guides**, interpreting data, creating and refining a coding framework, and writing up. It views these stages within the broader context, locating qualitative research in terms of the philosophical and disciplinary assumptions that underpin it and discussing the relative merits and skills required by researchers applying different methods – interviewing, focus groups, ethnography, document analysis, visual methods, online, and action research.

The Introduction to the book (Chapters 1-4) addresses, firstly, The scope and contribution of qualitative research. This first chapter looks at the sorts of questions qualitative research can address; what is distinctive about this approach; and the role of individual researchers' dispositions. It then goes on to outline the range of methods used and attempts to delineate the broad propositions that characterize qualitative research endeavours. The role of different disciplines in both utilizing and shaping qualitative approaches is considered. Finally, it examines the expectations of qualitative methods and the capacity of qualitative research to influence policy and practice. Chapter 2 - Qualitative traditions: epistemology and ontology provides a brief history of the origins and features of the major qualitative traditions. It also gives an insight into the 'paradigm wars' - between what can be summarized as traditional/quantitative/'positivist' models of research and the supposedly less conventional/qualitative/'interpretivist' approach. This chapter also considers the place of qualitative research in relation to philosophical traditions (the 'epistemology' and 'ontology' involved). Chapter 3 guides the researcher through the decisions and processes involved in developing a Research design, looking, firstly, at the rationale for utilizing a qualitative approach. Some hints are provided with regard to formulating a research question. This chapter also steers the researcher through the choices that s/he must make in terms of selecting methods, deciding on their sequencing and the advantages and disadvantages of specific approaches. Particular attention is paid to sampling, as this determines to a large extent the comparisons that the researcher is able to make and, hence, the analytic potential of the dataset that is generated. Chapter 4, on Ethics, provides a short history of ethics review procedures and helps the researcher to understand the concerns that underpin these. It focuses on the implications for research design and planning projects, ensuring that due attention is paid to the potential ethical issues involved in a proposed piece of research. It looks in detail at the complex ethical issues surrounding action research and explores the