

Review:

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Catherine Marshall & Gretchen B. Rossman (2006). *Designing Qualitative Research*. Thousands Oaks: Sage Publication, 262 pages (4th edition), ISBN 9781412924894, USD \$47.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781412924887, USD \$90.95 (hardback)

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Abstract: This book is a well-informed introduction to qualitative research methodologies and is organized as a guide for the preparation of qualitative research proposals. It describes and discusses, in seven chapters, different types of qualitative research and the appropriate methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. This fourth edition includes references to recent theoretical and methodological developments associated with post-modern, feminist and post-colonial perspectives as well as the new challenges faced by online qualitative research. It is a useful reference for undergraduate and graduate students interested to develop a qualitative research project.

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1. Introduction

The need and the relevance of introductory books on research methods for students and researchers new to the field of qualitative analysis is consensual. The relevance of such books is even greater if they go beyond the simple description of each method and put them into the context of the different stages of the research process. [1]

In *Designing Qualitative Research*, Catherine MARSHALL and Gretchen B. ROSSMAN describe and discuss how to plan a qualitative research project and offer useful guidance for writing research proposals that fit within this paradigm. The book shows that the place and importance of qualitative research has moved backward and forward over the years and has always been affected by some form of discrimination from mainstream positivism. At the same time, the authors also note that the critical and cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities

means that the value and use of qualitative analysis has risen in those disciplines, despite the ideological, empowering and democratizing purposes of post-modern, feminist and post-colonial perspectives. As Catherine MARSHALL and Gretchen B. ROSSMAN highlight, however, qualitative research still faces negative attitudes from researchers working within the positivist quantitative paradigm and, in some governmental institutions, the dominant view still seems to be that a proper research approach must address causal relations and employ randomized experimental designs. [2]

2. Overview of the Book

2.1 Traditional versus critical qualitative research

In the first chapter ("Introduction"), MARSHALL and ROSSMAN identify and discuss two different forms of qualitative research, which are based on different assumptions about what constitutes appropriate inquiry. Within these two main streams of qualitative analysis, the traditional and the critical, the book identifies different modes of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences, describes how each of them is applied, discusses its strengths and weaknesses, and defines the principles that should guide the research process. [3]

For the authors, traditional qualitative research assumes that "knowledge is not objective truth but is produced inter-subjectively [...]); the researcher learns from participants to understand the meaning of their lives but should maintain a certain stance of neutrality [...]; society is reasonably structured and is orderly" (p.5). For critical, feminist and post-modern qualitative research, knowledge is also subjective but, contrary to traditional approaches, sees society as essentially conflictive and oppressive and critique an elitist mode of knowledge production that excludes the most marginalized and oppressed social groups. [4]

For critical qualitative research, scientific inquiry can "contribute to radical change or emancipation from oppressive social structures, either through a sustained critique or through direct advocacy and action taken by the researcher, often in collaboration with participants in the study" (p.5). For this approach, research involves issues of power and is affected by the researcher's social identities (i.e., race, class, gender, etc.). Therefore, for the authors, the voice given to members of oppressed and marginalized social groups in qualitative research is one of the main differences between critical and traditional qualitative research. For feminist and post-modern perspectives in qualitative research, it is essential to examine how the "other" or the "participant" is represented. [5]

For each of these perspectives the book offers concise and valuable information about their main characteristics and a list of references for further reading and exploration on the following topics: introduction to qualitative research; narrative analysis; action research; critical and post-critical ethnography; participatory action research; and feminist research. [6]

2.2 What to study and how to do a qualitative study

The following two chapters examine and discuss what to study and how to do a qualitative study. Chapter Two ("The What of the Study: Building the Conceptual Framework") offers a description of how the conceptual framework in a qualitative research proposal must be organized and explore a number of issues that, in the authors' opinion, have to be considered. Among others aspects, MARSHALL and ROSSMAN show how and why it is important to demonstrate in the research proposal that the researcher's positionality (i.e., her/his social identities) will not bias the study during data collection and interpretation and in the writing of the final narrative, and why it is also important to be permanently aware of this during the research process. Because knowledge is seen as subjective by qualitative researchers, this is a critical issue that must be addressed in the proposal and considered during the research process as well. [7]

In the third chapter ("The How of the Study: Building the Research Design"), the authors describe the different phases of a qualitative research project and, in doing that they emphasize a number of aspects that should be taken in account. For example, the proposal must explain why the setting chosen (site, population and the phenomenon) to be studied is more appropriate than others and what its main advantages and disadvantages are, since this choice determines the decisions that will guide all actions in the following steps of the research process. The book not only offers useful guidance on how this can be done, but also shows how the researcher can get the data she/he needs and how to define the samples of people, actions, events and /or processes. [8]

The researcher's role (full participant or observer), issues of entry, reciprocity, personal biography and ethics (i.e., informed consent, privacy, etc.) are other examples of the issues that need to be clarified in this section of the proposal and which must be taken in account during the research process. The answers to these points will certainly be different in the more traditional qualitative research, which adheres to the possibility of neutrality, as mentioned before, when compared to critical post-modern perspectives. [9]

In both chapters the book includes vignettes in which these research situations are illustrated with examples taken from real research situations. [10]

2.3 Data collection, management, recording, analysis and interpretation in qualitative research

The next two chapters present and offer a constructive discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of several primary and secondary methods of data collection (Chapter Four) as well as about the management, recording, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data (Chapter Five). [11]

The primary methods of data collection in qualitative research examined in the book include, for example, the following: observation; participant observation; in-depth interviewing (i.e., generic interview; ethnographic interview;

phenomenological interview; interviewing elites; interviewing children); and analysis of documents and material culture. These methods can and should be complemented, as the authors suggest, by other specialized methods: focus groups; life histories; narrative inquiry; historical analysis; films, video, photography; interaction analysis; unobtrusive forms of data collection; questionnaires and surveys; projective techniques and psychological testing; and dilemmas analysis. For most of these primary and secondary methods, the book includes a short description of its origin, definition, assumptions, strengths and weaknesses, examples, and a protocol to guide their application in practice. [12]

In Chapter Five, the book shows how and why it is important to plan in advance how the data collected and recorded will be retrieved for analysis and interpretation. The authors argue that a balance has to be found between the need for an easy retrieval system to collect data for analysis and the need to adapt or alter the pre-defined categories during the analysis (i.e., it is easier when the researcher uses lists of pre-determined categories for data coding than when this task has no such framework). Therefore, a balance between effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility, without compromising the assumptions of qualitative research, needs to be found. The researcher can be either nearer the idea of an objectivist approach or, in the other extreme, nearer the ideal model of qualitative research (i.e., "in which categories are not prefigured and which rely heavily on the researcher's intuitive and interpretive capacities", p.155). In the more objectivist approach, data collection and analysis are more structured and will exclude the uncommon and the unpredicted. The opposite is expected to happen with an open and flexible methodological approach. [13]

2.4 Planning time and resources in qualitative research

In Chapter Six ("Planning time and resources"), MARSHALL and ROSSMAN examine the important issue of planning time, personnel and financial resources in a qualitative research project. Since qualitative analysis is labor intensive, time is a key variable to be considered when planning a study. A reliable metric for estimating the time required for data management, analysis and report writing in qualitative analysis is, in the authors' opinion, the number of days assigned to data collection, since the quantity of data collected will determine the amount of time required in the following phases. Readers, especially those new in the field of qualitative analysis, will find here useful indicative guidance for the preparation of this important component of the research project, which however must be adapted to each specific research situation. [14]

2.5 Validity and reliability: which criteria for qualitative analysis?

The final Chapter (Chapter Seven—"Articulating value and logic") is a well grounded discussion about the rationale and the relevance of qualitative research. As the authors emphasize, qualitative and quantitative research don't apply the same criteria of validity or goodness and, therefore, the notion of consistency is different in each of these two paradigms of scientific research. Positivism presumes a static social world where investigation can be replicated,

while, by contrast, qualitative research, whose assumptions suggest that the social world is always being constructed, does not claim to be replicable, at least not in the same way as positivism does. For the qualitative researcher, it is more important to register the intricacy of the different contexts and interrelations than to control the research conditions, contrary to what happens in the positivist research experimental model. [15]

Nonetheless, as in any other kind of research, a qualitative research project also needs to justify its consistency and the criteria used to assess it as well. For MARSHALL and ROSSMAN there are advantages if this is done by reference to the terms used by the positivist research model: internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. [16]

For the authors, based on LINCOLN and GUBA, the first criterion is credibility or believability (i.e., "How credible are the particular findings of the study? By what criteria can we judge them?", p.201). It corresponds to the positivist notion of internal validity and means that the qualitative investigation was conducted in a way as to guarantee that the research issue was properly identified and described. The second criterion, corresponding to the positivist notion of external validity, is transferability or generalizability (i.e., "How transferable and applicable are these findings to another setting or group of people?", p.201). This criterion assesses how far research findings will be useful to others in analogous conditions. Considering the assumptions of qualitative analysis, the idea of transferability or generalizability to other situations may be difficult, a characteristic seen by positivist scientific standards as a weakness of this methodology. However, as MARSHALL and ROSSMAN show, qualitative research based on several cases, various informants and on more than one method of data collection can reinforce the study's importance for other places or situations or, in other words, its transferability or generalizability. The third criterion defined by the authors is dependability (i.e., "How can we be reasonably sure that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context?", p.201). The fourth and last criterion identified in the book is confirmability (i.e., "How can we be sure that the findings reflect the participants and the inquiry itself rather than a fabrication from the researcher's biases or prejudices?", p.201), equivalent to the positivist notion of objectivity. In essence, this criterion means that the research design must allow the confirmation of the findings of the study by another person. [17]

Besides this set of criteria, equivalent to those used in positivist quantitative research, the authors argue that there are other kinds of criteria, received from feminist theory and critical theory, which can be used to assess the goodness of qualitative research. For the authors (and I agree with them), the research will be good, for instance, if it contributes to emancipatory change, if it denounces oppressive power relations, if it does not "otherize" participants, and if it benefits and empowers those usually marginalized, preferably through collaborative research approaches. [18]

3. Evaluative Commentary

MARSHALL and ROSSMAN's book is a well-informed, competently written and a comprehensive introduction to qualitative research methods and distinguishes itself from other introductory books by the fact that it offers a practical guide for the writing of qualitative research proposals. However, as the authors note, this volume does not intend to replace the numerous books that deal with specific theoretical issues and methods in qualitative research. Since the book does not explore in detail the philosophical bases, the history and the methods applied in qualitative analysis, the advanced graduate student or the professional social scientist already familiar with this genre of research methodology will need to look for additional guidance in books that deal specifically and more deeply with one or with a group of qualitative methods or issues, some of which are referred, at the end of each chapter as suggestions for further reading. [19]

In sum, the intended audience—"advanced undergraduate and graduate students taking their first or second Qualitative Research Methods or General Research Method's course"—will certainly find this book a useful tool for starting a qualitative research project. [20]

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