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## Book Review

# Designing qualitative research

Yu Fu

Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, Sage, London, 5th edn, 2011, £34.99, 321pp. ISBN: 978-1-4129-7044-0

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In the search for approaches to explore the social world, Mason (2002: p. 1) considers qualitative research as “a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter.” Qualitative research methodologies have been broadly adopted by phenomenologists, postmodernists, anthropologists, psychologists, and feminists (for example, Atkinson *et al.*, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Wetherell *et al.*, 2001). Other “younger” disciplines, such as research across culture, gender, ethnicity, “race,” and sexuality (for example, Kamenou, 2007; Gamble and Huang, 2009), have also implemented qualitative approaches of acquiring knowledge in these fields. Qualitative methodologies have been useful in the study of how people make sense of their world and how they reflect on their experiences (Bergman *et al.*, 2010). The latest edition of *Designing Qualitative Research* encompasses the qualitative methodological issues in relation to the “younger” disciplines, as well as the challenges and concerns in relation to the conventional research. In addition, ideas and arguments regarding “ethics” and “reflexivity” have also been discussed in this book. The chapters in the book can be divided into two sections; strategic planning of research design and generation of qualitative data.

Section one (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10) deals with strategic planning of research design, and suggests how a successful research proposal can be developed. Chapter 1 introduces a rationale for conducting qualitative research, and presents the key challenges and issues in developing the research methodologies. Chapter 2 discusses several conventional, as well as critical and emerging qualitative research genres, such as feminist theories and cultural studies. For example, it is argued that cultural research “is embedded within the meaning-making process, which can contribute to and endorse discursive representations that in turn objectify a research participant’s lived experience” (p. 24). The authors also point out that “in qualitative research, cultural studies offer a lens to acknowledge a researcher’s place and position of power, while recognizing how the researcher’s past can shape the ways in which s/he represents the world of another” (p. 24). It is argued that researchers’ experience helps to provide possibilities and suggestions that can help to unravel the response from research participants. This unpacking process allows researchers to recognize the underlying themes and consequent organization of data. Central for the good quality of qualitative data analysis, according to Bryman

(2008), is that researchers are reflexive in their practice with the data by critically assessing their own roles as researchers, as well as the data and the findings and conclusions drawn from them.

Chapter 3 addresses the quality and moral implications of research design, which is also discussed in the other chapters. Then “building the conceptual framework” (p. 57) of qualitative research is discussed in Chapter 4 with arguments of what kind of research can be best investigated and analyzed by qualitative methods. “Building the research design” (p. 89) of qualitative research is discussed in Chapter 5 and the issue of the quality of qualitative data is emphasized again in this chapter. Moreover, the importance of research identity, voice and biases, is also addressed by the authors in the chapter. As mentioned earlier, one of the key issues in relation to cultural studies, is the importance of reflexivity in researchers. This issue is addressed by the authors again in Chapter 5 where it is argued that “research design should include reflection on one’s identity and one’s sense of voice and perspectives, assumptions, and sensitivities” (p. 96).

In addition, it is recognized that “personal insights are separated from the researcher’s collection of data” (p. 97) in order to reduce subjectivity and biases from the researcher. For example, Bryman (2008) contends that researchers who conduct their studies in a different culture may have the advantage of observing everything around them as something new, as they are aware of differences that exist between their culture and the one under study. According to Bryman (2008), researchers who conduct studies in their own culture face the opposite type of difficulties because both researchers and participants can take for granted behaviors, ways of thinking, and linguistic patterns. In other words, both of them can have similar assumptions about social values and rules. Therefore, researchers and participants have to manufacture their distance: researchers need to move away from the take-for-granted assumptions and create a critical awareness of familiar surroundings. The participants also need to recognize the actions from their habits, and the beliefs from their assumptions. In this situation, both researchers and participants

need to create a way to see the familiar reality in an unfamiliar manner, otherwise researchers would not learn anything new, but would instead confirm their preordained assumptions.

Chapter 9 presents concerns and challenges from a resource-based view emphasizing that time, personnel and financial issues need to be considered during the process of qualitative research planning and designing. Chapter 10 highlights the key issues of developing a successful research proposal and addresses the importance of the trustworthiness of qualitative data.

Part two deals with generation of qualitative data (Chapter 6, 7, and 8). Chapter 6 and 7 discuss different data collection methods, such as interviewing, observation, visual and documentary methods. Chapter 8 describes a range of techniques for organizing and coding qualitative data, and approaches that can be used to construct interpretation and analysis of the data. It is argued that reflexivity is also important during the process of data analysis (Mason, 2002). It is proposed that researchers should consider the process as active, self-critical and relational, through which qualitative argument can be constructed and communicated.

Schweiger (2007), who wrote a book review on the fourth edition of *Designing Qualitative Research*, argued that the fourth edition “provides an excellent guideline for beginners in empirical work as it combines theoretical instructions with the practical knowledge of the two authors,” however, “is rather about writing proposals for research projects based on qualitative methods than introducing those” (*ibid*, p. 1). Schweiger’s (2007), comments can also be applied to this latest edition of the book. This book could engage with more research philosophies, such as ontological, epistemological concepts associated with different data generation methods, if the authors of the book would like to target more readers, such as doctoral students and researchers, in a broader context. These philosophical concepts represent different ways of asking what research is really about. Although ontology and epistemology are often considered to be difficult concepts to grasp, it is nevertheless very important that researchers think about their own projects in these terms.

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### About the author

**Yu Fu** is a Research Assistant in the HRM Department at Coventry University. Yu Fu’s research interest focuses on international HRM, particularly national cultural factors in employment. The Ph.D. thesis she has been working on is about investigating the impact of Chinese cultural values on HR policies and practices within multinational companies in China. She can be reached at [yu.fu@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:yu.fu@coventry.ac.uk).