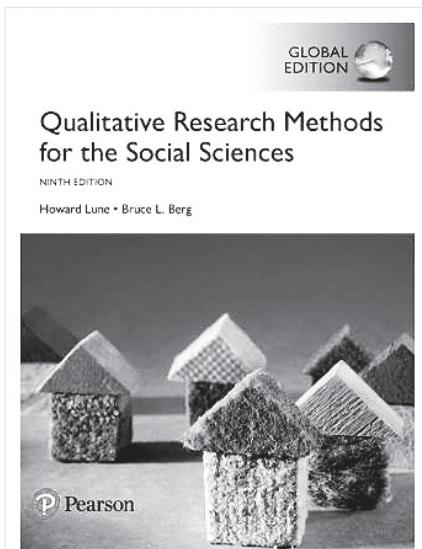


Book review: Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences



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Social Science is the study of people and their behavior, both individually and in groups (Punch, 2005; Bhattacherjee, 2012). Three disciplines in this field are psychology, sociology, and economics (Bhattacherjee, 2012). When conducting social science research, a qualitative research methodology is often needed. Researchers apply multiple methods in collecting and analyzing data, because the objects being studied, namely people, are inherently complex (Punch, 2005) and therefore the researchers must be flexible and ready to change their approaches as new ideas emerge from the collected data (Dornyei, 2007). The nature of research samples in studies in social science is often relatively narrow, since only a small proportion of the set of human beings can be sampled. Hence, researchers using small samples should be cautious in generalizing to larger groups from their results (Dornyei, 2007).

To understand fully the qualitative research paradigm, it is important to study and review a variety of different resources. One such resource is the book entitled, “**Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences**,” written by Howard Lune, an associate professor of sociology at Hunter College, and Bruce L. Berg, a professor at California State University, published in 2017. The book is in its ninth edition, and this has some differences from the previous edition, particularly the inclusions of 1) new exercises and questions for discussions; 2) new contemporary examples; and 3) more information about the use of software to analyze qualitative data. However, the topics of each chapter remain much the same as the previous edition. This is perhaps because the authors emphasize the well-established concepts of research procedures, which are practical and understandable. I use this book with my undergraduate students to teach the main qualitative research theories and practices, and to help apply them appropriately when conducting research projects.

The book is practical and resourceful, with information likely to be of use to anyone who is a tertiary lecturer, academic, and/or researcher in the social sciences. This paper aims to critically review this book in order to help introduce its perspective on qualitative research methodology to students, teachers, researchers, and academics.

Regarding the purposes and features of this book, it is designed to help researchers who are planning or conducting research using the qualitative methodological paradigm. Each section is structured around simple exploratory questions, typically beginning with what, why, when, or how. For example, “what these techniques are; why, when, and how we use them; and what we can get out of them” (p. 20). The book consists of twelve chapters. The contents cover background information on social science and qualitative research methodology, procedures in designing a research project, knowledge on research ethics and interviewing techniques, strategies in dealing with ethnographic research, basic concepts in participatory action research (PAR), case studies, content analysis, historical research, usefulness of unobtrusive measurement in qualitative research, and research writing procedures. Readers are not necessarily expected to read according to the chapter sequence, because most chapters are independently themed, except for chapters 1 and 2. Both of these chapters contain basic knowledge which is essential for all readers, and so is especially vital for novice researchers or others who have less expertise or knowledge of the qualitative research approach in social science.

In terms of the structure of this book, each chapter is divided into theory and practice, providing examples or cases, giving suggestions and limitations, and emphasizing the current issues relating to particular topics.

The book begins with an overview of the basic concepts of social science and qualitative research methodology in chapter 1, namely “**Introduction**”. Chapter 2 is on “**Designing qualitative research**”. This chapter provides practical guidelines on procedures in designing qualitative research projects by emphasizing qualitative research theory and concepts, steps in writing and searching for literature reviews, basic knowledge on designing research methodology, and disseminating research data after completing the project. Chapter 3 is about “**Ethical issues in research**”. This chapter covers a range of issues which are increasingly important for every serious researcher. Competent researchers must be aware of the central place of ethics in conducting research. The authors raise issues such as questionable research use, consent forms, data confidentiality, and web-based data. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are about concepts, techniques, and procedures for collecting qualitative data using interviews and ethnographic data. These chapters are titled, “**A Dramaturgical look at interviewing**” (chapter 4), “**Focus group interviewing**” (chapter 5), and “**Ethnographic field strategies**” (chapter 6). Chapters 7, 9, 10, and 11 describe the features of different types of qualitative methods, including “**Participatory Action Research**” (chapter 7), “**Social Historical Research and Oral Traditions**” (chapter 9), “**Case Studies**” (chapter 10), and “**An Introduction to Content Analysis**” (chapter 11). Chapter 7 provides readers with the tools needed to successfully implement participatory action research approaches. The chapter discusses the theory and its key concepts, the methodological procedures involved, and also some factors which may lead to difficulties in conducting this type of research. Chapter 9 mainly focuses on historical research concepts and procedures. It also covers the oral historical research method. This research type is related to the methods of collecting and

analyzing the life history of an individual or group. In terms of case studies, in chapter 10, the authors discuss when it is appropriate for qualitative researchers to focus on individual stories, rather than group phenomena, when conducting research. Case studies are often used by physicians, psychologists, entrepreneurs, information scientists, teachers, anthropologists and lawyers. This chapter provides useful sources on theory and concepts, procedures, examples, and factors that may cause problems when using case studies. Chapter 11, “**An Introduction to Content Analysis**”, describes, and guides the reader on how to apply, content analysis techniques in qualitative studies. This methodological technique is regarded as “a qualitative research method in its own right and as the backbone of most qualitative analysis” (p. 181). This chapter also discusses the differences between content and discourse analysis and gives guidance for using software to analyze qualitative data. It ends with noting some factors that can lead to problems within this type of research. Finally, chapters 8 and 12 are differently structured. Chapter 8, “**Unobtrusive Measures in Research**,” guides readers on how to use unobtrusive data in specialized ways and how to adapt archival data according to different research purposes. The last chapter, chapter 12, “**Writing Research: Finding Meaning in Data**,” is designed for new researchers who may be writing their first complete research paper and disseminating it for publication. It also covers plagiarism, common mistakes in writing research papers, and highlighted points for making the writing more interesting.

The overall structure of the book allows each chapter to stand independently, while a complete reading covers all the main concepts of the qualitative research methodological paradigm. The book will therefore be very useful both for new qualitative researchers, and for more experienced academics, offering up-to-date insights into

many vital issues. It is practical in use, and will appeal to audiences who aim to study and use the basic concepts of the qualitative research paradigm. It also encourages the use of multiple methods to triangulate research data, thus ensuring greater reliability and validity of results as related to research purposes.

The book is intended primarily as an introductory overview, and so those readers who are already experts in the field of qualitative research, seeking a deeper study of the subject matter, will no doubt wish to explore more specialised resources. Lastly, I would like to comment that this is a practical book that guides its readers towards autonomous learning. As the authors remark in the preface section, the book can be conveniently used as part of a 12-15 week course, or following any schedule of learning that is convenient for the student. As a tertiary lecturer, I have found that this book has proven to be a highly effective resource for my students, and is particularly useful for autonomous learners.

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