

Qualitative Research for Allied Health Professionals: Challenging Choices

Edited by

Linda Finlay and Claire Ballinger



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

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For Abbi, Amy and Anthony

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Prologue

SUPERVISOR: So how are your ideas for your research coming along?

STUDENT: I thought I might like my study to focus on exploring pain.

SUPERVISOR: OK. Do you mean you want to hear about individuals' experience of pain? Or how people perceive and represent their pain? Or maybe you want to focus on how pain is constructed? Your research question is really important as it implies different methodologies.

STUDENT: Oh, definitely the first. The people I work with in therapy have such vivid ways of talking about their pain. I don't think we really appreciate what it's like.

SUPERVISOR: That's interesting. You could do that. But think for a minute. There are a number of assumptions you seem to be making here: that people's experience of pain is a real entity; that they have a way of describing it; and that you will be able to capture what that is.

STUDENT: Umm, yes, I guess so. (*Hesitation*) I'm not sure I really understand what you're saying.

SUPERVISOR: You seem to be suggesting that pain is an experience that's clear-cut and absolute. Many qualitative researchers would see the experience of pain not as cut and dried but as highly variable. They'd argue that what we really need to investigate is people's *meanings* of pain: what pain means to individuals will vary according to the context and their needs at the time. So you might want to think about that. Patients will be presenting themselves to you in a certain light. Where you talk to them, and in what capacity, might make a difference to what they say.

STUDENT: Well, I hadn't thought of that. (*Pause*) I suppose that means they might say something different, for example if a family member rather than a therapist were to ask them about it?

SUPERVISOR: Absolutely. Your challenge is to decide what exactly you think you mean by ‘experience of pain’, and then you need to think about how best to explore it. So far, you’ve only alluded to interviews as a possible method of data collection, or data generation as I prefer to call it. Let’s play around with some other possible ways of generating data. Can you think of any?

STUDENT: Hmm. That’s difficult. I suppose I had assumed that talking to people would be the most obvious way of getting at what it was like for them.

SUPERVISOR: Well, I’m not suggesting that you don’t do interviews. At this stage, all I’m asking is that you keep open to different possibilities. How about asking people to write diaries, for example

...

Does this conversation sound familiar? The idea of writing this book sprang in part from our past participation in such discussions. Initially, we took part as students who were about to embark on specific qualitative research journeys. Latterly, we have participated as teachers and supervisors, guiding others through the dense tangle of qualitative approaches, paradigms and methodologies. Whether as apprehensive student or experienced teacher, however, we share an enthusiasm and a passion for qualitative modes of enquiry: a commitment that we hope, in the pages of this book, to convey to our readers.

This book is also a celebration of the ‘coming of age’ of the allied health professions (AHPs) within the qualitative research arena. AHP researchers are now able to engage in debate on methodology and epistemology in a way that would have been impossible even ten years ago. This is evidenced by the large number of therapists embarking on higher degrees, the contribution of therapy researchers to international generic research publications such as the journal *Qualitative Health Research*, and extensive thoughtful discussion within our professional journals.

Quite deliberately, the subtitle of this book, *Challenging Choices*, carries a double meaning. It makes the point that the qualitative research endeavour is likely to be challenging to us as researchers. But it also affirms that the choices that we make in designing, carrying out and reporting our research will be challenged and contested. These are themes we focus on in this book. Specifically, our aims are to:

- highlight some of the choices that you as the researcher will be required to make, and clarify their implications;

- offer a wide range of practical examples to show how these different ways of doing qualitative research can be managed;
- critically examine a variety of qualitative research methodologies of particular interest to allied health professionals;
- make explicit the links between epistemology, methodology and method.

This book is structured in three parts. In Part I, we aim to sensitise you, the reader, to the complex issues that challenge qualitative researchers at the planning stage of their projects. In Part II, the challenge of using different methodologies in practice is critically explored by 15 authors who share their individual research experiences. Part III examines the choices we make when we evaluate and present research.

We hope you will find this book both exciting and helpful. Inevitably, there are many gaps in terms of topics and issues covered, and methodologies represented. Although we want the book to have a practical focus, we do not offer detailed guidelines about specific methods. Instead, we provide examples from a broad sweep of research practice in an attempt to promote critical dialogue.

As our contributing authors reveal their struggles and uncertainties, we value their preparedness to be open. We continue to be impressed by their thoughtfulness, their concern for participants and ethical practice, and their commitment to qualitative research. We also celebrate the diversity demonstrated across these contributions as the authors reveal different values, theoretical perspectives and methodological commitments.

Many people have helped with the successive drafts of this book. First, we'd like to acknowledge the rich contribution made by Barbara Steward, who played a key role in conceiving this project. Secondly, we are indebted to all our chapter authors. They rose to the challenge of writing about their research within tight word limits and showed patience and grace in the face of our shifting ideas for chapter structure. Thirdly, we'd like to acknowledge our husbands Mel and Chris: without their support and encouragement we couldn't have carried the project through. Then, a special thanks goes to Susan Ram for her invaluable editing advice. Finally, our gratitude needs to be extended to Colin Whurr for initially believing in the project and to Emma Hatfield (Project Editor) and her team for seeing the manuscript through to publication.

*Linda Finlay and Claire Ballinger
September 2005*

PART I

Planning the Research

In this first part of the book, we invite you to reflect on issues and questions that arise during the planning phase of research. The first of these is whether an exploratory, qualitative approach to your topic of interest is the best way forward. In **Chapter 1**, Linda Finlay takes a look at the diverse methodologies that are included within the broad church of qualitative research. She also clarifies the sorts of questions that qualitative research approaches are particularly suited to answering.

Novice researchers are often bewildered by the plethora of terms and expressions they encounter in their preliminary reading around qualitative research approaches. In **Chapter 2**, Linda Finlay sets out to demystify concepts such as ‘methodology’, ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’. Using examples from practice, she shows how methodology and method are inter-related, and illustrates how initial choices have consequences for the interpretation of data and for the types of explanation adopted.

Chapter 3, by Barbara Steward, continues to explore the decisions related to research method with which a qualitative researcher must engage. She offers practical advice on a range of questions, including how to choose a research topic and question, how to use supporting literature, which methods to choose, and how to find and gain access to participants.

The parameters of what is considered principled research have undergone change, with important consequences for research. In **Chapter 4**, the final one in this opening part of the book, Claire Ballinger and Rose Wiles look at some of the issues relating to research ethics and governance. They offer suggestions for how to interpret current guidelines to suit qualitative enquiry.

1

'Going Exploring': The Nature of Qualitative Research

LINDA FINLAY

The process of engaging in qualitative research is rather like 'going exploring'. Uncharted territory beyond the reach of conventional research (with its claims to objectivity and its quantitative instincts) beckons us irresistibly. We embark on a 'quest' (Rosaldo, 1989); we sense that 'adventure' (Willig, 2001) lies ahead. Our preparations made, we begin our research journey with no fixed ideas about its content or destination. If anything, we expect to be surprised; we know that, for all our planning, we will stumble into unanticipated situations or tread unmapped paths. What we discover along the way may astonish, delight or perplex us. We may lose our way, go round in circles, find solid ground giving way to mire, it matters not. The qualitative research journey remains enticing though 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure' (Finlay, 2002, p. 209).

Like explorers bent on penetrating the unknown, qualitative researchers are fired by the excitement and challenge of the enterprise. Frustration and discomfort are more than counterbalanced by moments of exhilaration. The challenge lies in mapping a path, with the help of compass and guides (books, mentors and supervisors), that safeguards our passage while enabling us to experience the richness and complexity of our research terrain.

The chapters in this book aim to reveal something of the excitement and satisfactions of *doing* qualitative research, along with the uncer-

tainties and frustrations. More specifically, the authors who come together in this volume seek to highlight some of the ‘challenging choices’ they have had to face. There are many routes through – many ways of doing – qualitative research, and this very diversity means that decisions need to be carefully thought through. The purpose of this book is to contribute to making well-considered choices.

CHALLENGING CHOICES

One early critical choice that qualitative researchers face when planning research is which of the great variety of qualitative **methodologies** to adopt. As Cresswell (1998, p. 4) observes, qualitative researchers have before them ‘a baffling number of choices of traditions’! Should the research be conducted on the basis of grounded theory? Or should the choice be ethnomethodology? Or discourse analysis? Or phenomenology? Or ethnography? These are just a few of the diverse options. More than just selecting a methodology, we need to think about the aim and focus of our research. If we want to explore individuals’ life experiences, then our options would orientate towards phenomenological, psychodynamic, biographical or narrative research (such as described in Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12). If the focus is to be more on talk or text, then discourse or conversation analysis would be the better choice (see Chapters 8 and 14). If the aim is to understand cultural practices, then we would opt for ethnography (Chapter 6) or case-study research on organisations (Chapter 15).

The next set of decisions relates to the **methods** we will use to collect, and then analyse, data. What sources of data are potentially available and appropriate? Which methods of data collection and analysis would be most suitable, given our chosen methodology? Should we opt for interviews, observation or other procedures to gather data? Would combining methods (see Chapter 7) offer something more? What can the chosen methods feasibly tell us? Should our analysis take the form of a descriptive narrative (see Chapter 13) or should it be organised thematically (for instance in the grounded theory discussed in Chapter 5)? Given the inevitable constraints of time and competing demands, what is the most practical option?

In focusing on methodology and method, questions are raised about our **epistemological** and **theoretical** stance (see Chapter 2). For example, we should be in no confusion as to whether we are taking a realist or relativist position or whether we are attempting to describe

or explain the social world. Reaching a clear stance in relation to such questions is by no means easy. As two experienced researchers have noted, qualitative research 'embraces within its own multiple disciplinary histories constant tensions and contradictions over the project itself, including its methods and the forms its findings and interpretations take' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

There are also decisions to be made about **ethics** and the kinds of **relationships** we want to develop with our participants (see Chapters 3 and 4) and/or the readers and consumers of our research. Given that there is an 'intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 4), what is our role as researcher? Beyond seeking to do no harm, we often aim to empower and 'give voice' to our participants. We must be mindful that our research – which encourages us to reflect on ourselves and the social world around us – has the potential to be transformative, changing both us and our participants. If such power exists within our research, then that needs to be managed and respected. A key question here is whose interests are served by our research?

Finally, we need to think about how we should **evaluate** and **present** our research (see Chapters 16 and 17). How can this be done to ensure that our work is responsible and has integrity, meaning and value? As Seale points out:

A fallibilistic approach . . . is not well served by presenting a personal interpretation and then simply saying that people are free to disagree if they so wish. It requires a much more active and labour-intensive approach towards genuinely self-critical research, so that something of originality and value is created. (Seale, 1999, p. 6)

The choices we make inevitably lead us along different paths into varied explorations of contrasting terrains. Our versions of qualitative research will vary considerably. For all that, however, there are similarities to be found in the territory we explore and the navigational tools we use to guide us and give us direction. There are basic tenets or commonalities that unite seemingly disparate qualitative methodologies.

COMMONALITIES

If you put all the authors of this book in the same room it would probably be a noisy affair! We would fiercely debate the nature of the social world (ontology) and we'd argue about the best way to study it. Not all

of us would agree on the objective existence of a social world for us to study in the first place. Some would argue that it is the meanings, interpretations and language we use that construct that world. Some qualitative researchers would aim for objective, systematic research that reflects the social world as much as possible. Others disagree, valuing instead the existence of multiple realities and subjectivities and the potential of the research to transform what is being studied. In these ways, we would bandy words and concepts, contesting their meanings. (A quick look at the glossary at the end of the book will give you an indication of the sorts of ambiguities we face here.)

For all our passionate (but friendly) disagreement, however, we respect one another's choices. And we're also conscious of sharing certain assumptions, which distinguish us in a fundamental way from researchers in the quantitative, positivist tradition. To a greater or lesser extent, qualitative researchers all acknowledge and value

- the central role played by the researcher in the construction of knowledge;
- the significance of the researcher's relationship with participants and/or the social world;
- inductive, exploratory, hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-testing research;
- the role of interpretation and emergent meanings;
- the complex, rich and messy nature of qualitative findings.

These ideas are briefly explored below.

THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Qualitative researchers accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, and perhaps actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data. Researcher subjectivity – called 'bias' in quantitative research – is celebrated rather than seen as something to be shunned; it is viewed as an opportunity rather than a problem (Finlay, 2002).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCHER'S RELATIONSHIPS

We recognise that research is co-constituted, a joint product of participants, researchers and readers, and the relationship they build. Our

participants affect us, just as we affect them. We also recognise that we are influenced by wider social relationships and our historical and cultural situatedness in the world – and this recognition is subsumed into our work.

THE INDUCTIVE, EXPLORATORY, HYPOTHESIS-GENERATING NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative researchers start with open research questions rather than having a hypothesis to test. Qualitative research aims to investigate and understand the social world rather than to predict, explain and control behaviour. The focus is on the 'how' and 'what' rather than 'why' and 'whether'. For instance, instead of investigating whether a treatment intervention is effective by comparing a treatment group with a control group, the qualitative researcher would ask: 'How does this client experience this treatment?'

THE ROLE OF MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATION

We are concerned with how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. 'Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). We understand that meanings are fluid, subject to interpretation, and are negotiated within particular social contexts. We acknowledge that other researchers, using the same data, are likely to unfold different stories.

THE COMPLEX, RICH AND MESSY NATURE OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Qualitative researchers believe in rich, textured description that has the potential to move others. At the same time we recognise that findings are always partial, tentative, ambiguous, fluid and open to multiple interpretations and emergent meanings. We see our social world as too chaotic to be represented in unambiguous, clear-cut ways, or in terms of cause and effect. Whatever methodology qualitative researchers choose to embrace, we embark on a journey that is endlessly fascinating: a potentially transformative exploration of relationships and meanings within our social world. Whatever we know of our world, the

qualitative research journey opens fresh horizons, showing us how much more lies waiting to be explored.

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2

Mapping Methodology

LINDA FINLAY

Novice researchers planning their research projects can all too easily make the mistake of adopting a specific method (for instance doing interviews) without first locating that method in terms of a broader methodology, namely philosophy and associated methods. This is like embarking on a qualitative research ‘adventure’ (to pick up the theme in Chapter 1) without planning, preparation or a map!

This chapter seeks to provide a ‘map’ of the methodological choices facing researchers who embark on qualitative research. Specifically, I explore how methodology is always underpinned by philosophical and theoretical ideas (be they implicit or explicit) and how data collection and analysis methods tend to flow naturally from these methodologies. If we are truly to get to grips with qualitative research, it is crucial to be clear about the ideas we’re embracing when we commit to a methodology.

The idea of a chapter on philosophy and theory could well turn some readers off. If this is your reaction, I’d ask you to bear with me. I want to share my enthusiasm and commitment to this way of thinking about methodology. I hope to show you how meaningful and important philosophy and theory are – at the very least, that it is essential to be aware of possible options. Qualitative researchers need to be able to understand such concepts as epistemology, interpretivism, relativism and reflexivity. These are concepts that we regularly confront when reading qualitative research papers and when discussing our work with others. Grappling with these meanings transforms our research.

The first section of the chapter describes some different methodologies and explores the links between methodology and method. Then the next two sections, on philosophy and theory respectively, demonstrate how all research is underpinned by ideas, beliefs and assumptions. Finally, a reflections section emphasises that in a context of messy practice and contested ideas, it becomes even more important to attend to the goals and peculiarities of your specific methodology.

CHOOSING YOUR METHODOLOGY

COMMITTING TO A METHODOLOGY

Methodology is the overarching approach to research and encompasses both philosophy and methods (see Figure 2.1). Choosing a methodol-



Figure 2.1 Methodology bridging philosophy and method

ogy means selecting from alternative philosophical or theoretical positions, and deciding what research methods (procedures to collect and analyse data) to use. Philosophy and research methods are intertwined. Choosing particular philosophies usually implies the use of particular methods and vice versa.

There are abundant methodological approaches on offer: ethno-methodology, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, feminist approaches, cooperative enquiry, case studies, repertory grid, action research, biographical and historical approaches, and so on. (See the glossary for an orientating description of some of these key methodologies.) Each of these methodologies carries different aims, involves different research designs and utilises different research methods.

The examples in Box 2.1 demonstrate how five researchers aim to conduct and analyse their research in different ways – ways that

Box 2.1 Research on living with disability: five methodologies

Five researchers all plan to interview six participants on how they live and cope with their disability.

Niall chooses to do a **grounded theory** study underpinned by ‘postpositivist’, realist assumptions. His interview questions are focused analytically on the ‘coping’ process. When and how does coping happen? What disrupts coping? He sees the participants’ responses as a reasonably accurate reflection of their thoughts and feelings. He aims to categorise systematically their types of coping and to show how coping occurs in particular social situations. As he analyses the emergent themes, he works hard to stay faithful to what is contained in the data and not let personal biases intrude.

Julie adopts a **phenomenological** approach, aiming for rich description of individuals’ lived experience. She asks her participants to describe a particular moment of living with their disability as concretely as possible and she then focuses on what it means to them personally. She analyses this data hermeneutically in terms of existential themes, exploring her participants’ sense of embodiment, self–other relations, time and space. Her study is underpinned by ‘critical realist’ assumptions: she assumes that the

participants' accounts reflect something of their subjective perceptions of their lived experience while also recognising that her own interpretations have, inevitably, played a crucial role.

Masha undertakes a **discourse analysis**, based on social constructionist ideas. She aims to examine the way 'disability' is both constructed and performed by individuals. She views the 'text' (her transcripts) as a manifestation of discursive resources on which the participants are drawing to construct their versions. She is alert to the presence of cultural scripts, such as the use of particular narratives and metaphors (for example, seeing disability as 'personal tragedy' or 'heroic quest'). She takes her reflexive analysis seriously by recognising the power of her role as interviewer and the entirely co-constructed nature of the text. By acknowledging that another researcher would have obtained a different 'story', she demonstrates her 'relativist' assumptions.

Johnson undertakes an **ethnographic** study, aiming to understand the culture and characteristics of a rehabilitation unit as a social setting geared to helping clients with their disabilities. His interview questions are focused on how the clients perceive themselves and their rehabilitation. He is interested in how the clients are positioned in the setting and how they interact with each other and the professionals. He aims to develop a story of these clients and how this particular social and cultural context enables clients to live positively with their disability. By recognising the multiplicity of voices within a specific culture, he is taking an explicitly 'relativist' stance.

Sunaina chooses to do some **participatory action research** to help a group of British Asian women who speak little English to cope better with their respective disabilities. Specifically, she aims to study the effect of a new community outreach initiative designed to encourage these women to take up local rehabilitation opportunities. Sunaina aims to interview each participant both prior to the project and after six months. In addition, she will run an ongoing group to offer support and to monitor their changing needs. After a period of four months, she hopes that the women themselves will take on the running of this group. Sunaina is concerned that the women should be active participants in the programme and research project and she aims to involve them as co-researchers.

depend fundamentally on which methodology is adopted. Here we have five researchers embarking on projects that involve interviewing six participants about how they live and cope with disability. However, the similarities end there. The five researchers all have different aims for their research and they depart in completely different directions to explore different areas. These different aims have impacts not only on how the interviews are carried out and analysed, but also on the way the researchers see both their role and the nature of their research. In other words, the researchers have made significantly different methodological choices. Difficult ontological and epistemological concepts such as ‘realism’ and ‘relativism’ will be explained further in the next section. For now, just ride with the message of contrasting methodologies. Table 2.1 shows how the five case studies break down in terms of locating their respective methodologies, philosophies (epistemology and theory) and methods.

Table 2.1 Methodologies, philosophies and methods of the case studies

Name	Methodology	Philosophy Ontology/ epistemology	Theory	Method (data collection/ analysis)
Niall	Grounded theory	Realist, post-positivist	Less relevant – focus instead on published empirical work	Interview/ constant comparative method
Julie	Phenomenology	Critical realist, interpretivist	Ideas from work of Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists	Interview/ existential hermeneutic analysis
Masha	Discourse analysis	Relativist, post-structuralist	Ideas from work of Foucault and other sociologists	Interview/ Foucauldian discourse analysis
Johnson	Ethnography	Relativist, constructivist–interpretivist	Ideas stemming from anthropology and cultural studies	Interviews, participant observation/ ethnographic thematic analysis
Sunaina	Participatory action research	Realist, post-positivist	Less relevant – focus instead on published empirical work	Interviews, focus groups and questionnaires/ thematic and statistical analysis