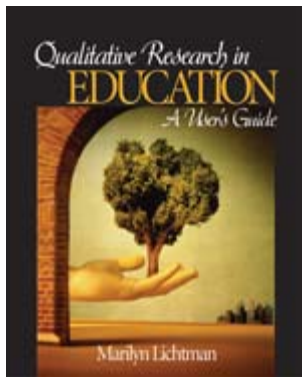


Book Review



Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide

Marilyn Lichtman

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Review by Elena Papamichael

With this 'how-to-do' book, Marilyn Lichtman, a retired professor of educational research and evaluation, aims to both introduce and guide the reader as they explore 'the very exciting field of qualitative research' (p.1). To do this she offers both theoretical and practical insights and information. Qualitative research, she suggests, is 'an umbrella term that includes many traditions whose focus is to study individuals in their natural settings in order to understand and interpret' their actions (p.220). Lichtman writes in the first person in a casual, approachable and enthusiastic manner; the whole book feels like a conversation between reader and author. The book is aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students who are new to the field of qualitative research. Being an MPhil/PhD student and employing a qualitative approach in my own research in education, many of the points made in this review will be about the book's usefulness for postgraduate researchers.

The first part of the book, 'Traditions and Influences', begins with the Introduction. It provides some basic theoretical and practical comparisons between quantitative and qualitative research – for example, in relation to the nature of reality, the role of the researcher, generalizability, objectivity/subjectivity, types of data collection and analysis, and writing style – summarized clearly in a two-page table, along with the author's comments (p.7-8). The main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience, investigated in its natural settings, in a holistic, in-depth and, not linear, but inductive way. At the end of this chapter (and every subsequent one), Lichtman suggests one group and one individual activity. Most of the individual-directed activities involve the creation of a personal research journal, a strategy that most qualitative researchers employ in order to reflect upon their previous experiences. The group-directed activities, however, would only be possible if the reader were part of a class. The author also appears to propose that a tutor should evaluate the individual-directed tasks.

An overview of the field of qualitative research, described as multidimensional, fluid and challenging, is presented in the second chapter. It introduces what the author sees as the main approaches to qualitative research, including ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, feminist theory, narrative analysis, postmodernism and critical theory. Lichtman gives examples from a range of studies and offers guidelines for the reader to allow them to carry out a simple qualitative study – after choosing a partner – an option that may not be possible for every reader?

Chapter Three is a historical overview of educational research in the United States and focuses on teacher education in American universities. Lichtman ends this chapter with a discussion of current and future research trends, such as greater diversity and creativity in answering questions about human interaction and representing information, greater access to and availability of information through the internet, and inclusion of more women and minority voices in the planning and designing of educational research. This chapter clearly refers to the American educational system and includes cultural specific references, such as

the soundtrack of the film *De-Lovely* which is 'rich, long lasting and ever fresh'; characteristics the author attributes to the qualitative research field as well. I would argue that a reader not interested in the American educational system or unfamiliar with some aspects of American culture might find this chapter, at best, simply informative in terms of the literature used, and at worst, irrelevant. Further, possibly problematic, culture-specific terms are found throughout the text, for example when the author refers to the 'Jeopardy game' (p.79). Some of the culture-specific references even carry moral connotations, for example when Lichtman suggests to the reader that, '[y]ou have read with shock and sadness of the inappropriate behaviours (sic) of many priests with young parishioners' (p.56). I would argue that, however casual and personal an author's writing style may be, such comments do not add to the rigour of the text.

Lichtman prompts the reader in Chapter Four to, '... get your notebook and pen ready, charge the battery in your digital camera, get your laptop out, and embark on this new adventure. I promise you that you will learn something; you will enjoy yourself; and, most importantly, you will gain some insight into being a qualitative researcher' (p.49). She suggests a checklist and some advice that the reader can use to see if being a qualitative researcher is right for them; however, deciding if one likes 'to be with people and see how they tick' might not be so straightforward for everyone. The reader is again invited to 'pick' a partner from their class and 'jump into being a qualitative researcher' (p.53). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of ethics in research – a discussion which, I would argue, requires further elaboration; especially in regard to how participants might be deceived about the nature, implications and extent of the proposed research.

Chapter Five is a detailed, more extensive discussion of the traditions and approaches informing qualitative research that were introduced earlier: anthropology and ethnography; grounded theory; phenomenological inquiry; case study; feminist research methods and theory; and, generic approaches. A historical review of each term, with examples from the field, is given, providing the reader with a clear introduction to each theoretical approach. I consider this chapter to be relevant to students of non-American universities as well, as it includes references and examples from Europe as well as from America.

The second part of the book, 'Gathering, Organizing and Analyzing', focuses on the methodology of qualitative research. It begins with an illustration of the exercise 'My Life as a Graduate Student', based on the game of twenty questions: an approach used Lichtman in her own teaching. Here she invites the reader to practice interviewing with their classmates or colleagues and then to analyze their experience. This chapter would be more relevant to lecturers wishing to include this exercise in their teaching; readers who are not part of a group would be unable to carry it out.

Chapter Seven discusses doing a literature review, giving an overview of the possible sources one might use – Lichtman suggests that one does not exclusively use journals, because of the long time needed until an article's publication and the possible biases of specific editors against qualitative research. She then provides examples of 'bad' and 'better' literature reviews and suggests practical ways of keeping track of things, such as using computers, videos or bibliographic software such as EndNote. The text is generally up to date in terms of current technology, websites and software.

Techniques, strategies, examples and advice relevant to different types of qualitative interview: in-depth, focus group and online, is offered in Chapter Eight. The author suggests a list of practical guidelines to inform a successful and productive interview– for example, when asking 'Do you have anything you want to add that we have not talked about?' at the end of each interview (p.121). Based on my own experience, I agree with Lichtman, in that one may be surprised at what one may learn from answers to such a question! Furthermore, examples of question types that could be used (or avoided!) are offered: these will be useful

for both beginner and more experienced interviewer, since they might draw one's attention to phrasing habits that affect the interviewee's responses. A very practical checklist for individual and focus group interviews is also provided in an appendix (p.215-216). How to observe in natural settings, through written documents and images or in online chat rooms is discussed next, being the focus of Chapter Nine: here the text is informed by many examples and anecdotes taken from the experiences of Lichtman's own students.

The third part, 'Putting it All Together', begins with the issue of analyzing data: Lichtman bases her account on the 'the 3 Cs of analysis: from Coding to Categorizing to Concepts' (p.167) and provides examples of putting these into practice. She also briefly discusses the advantages and disadvantages of NVivo, which she considers to be the best data analysis software available. The eleventh chapter offers writing-up guidelines. It is important to note here the difference between American and British academic terminology – for example, in the UK, 'thesis' is used in relation to a PhD and 'dissertation' to an MA, whereas, in America, the reverse is true. Lichtman, rightly in my view, suggests that students write in the first person, in order to acknowledge the researcher's role in the research itself. Along with the researcher's role, the author considers communication abilities; the provision of details and the use of convincing arguments to be crucial research evaluation criteria for the 21st century: this view is explored and presented in Chapter Twelve. The last chapter of the book discusses issues of subjectivity. Here Lichtman shares her personal journey through quantitative and qualitative research in order to emphasize the importance of self-reflexivity. A useful list of international journals, which are qualitatively oriented, is provided in the Epilogue (p.213-214). The text closes with a useful glossary offering brief definitions for all the terms (written in bold) that have been used in the text.

Overall, I feel that this book is written with a very specific audience in mind: mainly students in American universities and/or dealing with issues relating to the American educational system. In that case, the author achieves her goals – to introduce such students to the field of qualitative educational research. However, this specific contextualization of the handbook it is not stated in the key features on the book's cover, which might be confusing for a potential reader/buyer. Silverman's (2004) *Doing Qualitative Research: a practical handbook* may be an alternative choice for those seeking a 'how-to-do', qualitative educational research text. Nevertheless, lecturers intending to introduce their students to qualitative educational research may also consider using Lichtman's book, especially for the group and individual activities. Last, even postgraduate researchers, not dealing specifically with the US educational system, may still find the information regarding the main theoretical traditions useful (Chapters Five). The practical suggestions offered in Chapter Eight, regarding interviewing, and how to make observations (in Chapter Nine) may also be useful. Lichtman speaks from years of experience in researching and teaching – acting on some of her advice might be life- or, at least, research-saving for a beginner researcher!

Reference

Silverman, D. (2004) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage Publications

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