
Reviewed by Larry Davidson, Yale University

Connie Fischer is to be congratulated, and thanked, for producing such a useful and accessible volume on the use of qualitative research methods in psychology. Based on her almost forty years of experience teaching students about qualitative research and supervising qualitative dissertations, she has developed a keen understanding of the kinds of concerns, questions, and attitudes newcomers often bring to the enterprise of learning how to use qualitative methods. She has brought this understanding together in her introduction to the volume, and been guided by it in her selection of investigators and chapters to be included. What results is a volume that is unique in my own twenty years of experience of and familiarity with qualitative research, which is an extremely reader-friendly, accessible, and engaging book which both explains and illustrates some of the basic components of qualitative research to people who are assumed to know nothing about the approach (i.e., the average student). The care with which she has mentored generations of students comes across clearly in her efforts to render complicated concepts more easily understandable, in her gentle coaching and encouragement of the young investigator as he or she takes his or her first steps along this meandering journey, and in the resources she provides. Most notable among these resources are the commonly asked questions and responses and the extensive glossary she provides at the end of the book. These innovative features alone indicate the practical orientation of the book and the fact that it was developed as a textbook for people learning the ropes. Were I to have the opportunity to teach an introductory course on qualitative research methods, I undoubtedly would assign this book to my students.

My favorite part of the book is Fischer’s introduction, which covers a tremendous amount of territory in very few pages. It ranges from such topics as defining and determining the validity of qualitative research, to disabusing students of the notion that carrying out a qualitative study can be a way to avoid having to conduct a literature review or to learn about conventional scientific methods, to the necessity of securing IRB approval prior to collecting data. Of particular utility, to my mind, was her use of investigative journalism as a metaphor for explaining the approach of the qualitative researcher and her brief overview of guidelines for evaluating qualitative research projects. I was most taken, however, by her discussion of what she terms “getting back from being lost,” which alerts new investigators that they should anticipate several periods during the completion of any qualitative project in which they will inevitably doubt either the very possibility of
summarizing and writing up their findings—due to the complexity and richness of the data—or their own intelligence—due to the fact that the themes they have uncovered or created appear to be too arbitrary or too obvious. It has been my experience as well that these concerns pose common stumbling blocks for newer investigators; warning students ahead of time to expect these doubts and suggesting ways to understand and overcome them may prove invaluable in keeping up investigator morale and in encouraging students not to depart the qualitative tradition prematurely. It has also been my experience that these same doubts plague experienced qualitative investigators from time to time, and Fischer's articulation of the concerns and offer of suggestions for their resolution may be just as useful for the rest of us as well.

In terms of the contributed chapters which illustrate the different methods chosen, the reader will find the usual degree of variability in quality and interest found in most edited volumes. This variability may be useful for students as well, as they can not only be inspired by exemplary studies which produce surprising and important results but also can take solace in hearing about the mistakes, struggles, and limited successes of more experienced investigators whose studies may represent more the kind of product most students can expect from their own dissertation research. As a clinical psychologist who also engages in community and system development work, I found the chapters by Rennie, Goicoechea, and Levers to be of especial interest. Rennie's chapter offers a good introduction to grounded theory—a method that has historically been used more commonly in nursing, anthropology, sociology, and education than in psychology—and illustrates its use in exploring the evolution of clients’ relationships with their psychotherapists. Goicoechea uses a combination of pheno-menology, hermeneutics, and discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which psychiatric diagnosis is conveyed to patients and used by both staff and patients within the milieu of an inpatient psychiatric unit. The chapter contributed by Levers, on the other hand, addresses such topics as racism, trauma experienced by children in Namibia and by child protective service workers, and designing culturally relevant HIV/AIDS educational interventions for camp workers in Botswana. Levers describes the use of focus group methodology along with key informant interviews and participant observation to carry out what she describes as a “rapid assessment” phase in each of these projects, more clearly demonstrating than the other chapters the practical ways in which qualitative methods are increasingly being used in a number of fields to generate essential, but “difficult-to-obtain” (p. 385), information early on in the development of larger-scale, mixed methods studies.

The three chapters described above offer highly readable and useful introductions to their methods of choice while at the same time presenting well-conceived