

Review:

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**Clive Seale (1999). *The Quality of Qualitative Research*.** London: Sage, 214 pages, Cloth (ISBN 07619 5597 6) £ 50.00, Paper (ISBN 07619 5598 4) £ 16.99

#### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Overview of the Book](#)
- [3. Highlights](#)
- [4. Extending Methods of Evaluating Quality](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction

*The Quality of Qualitative Research* is part of series of volumes, *Introducing Qualitative Methods*, which aim to introduce qualitative research to students and researchers new to the field. The series claims to be interdisciplinary and international. In the preface to this volume, the author stresses that in writing this book he wishes to "encourage awareness about the methodological implications of particular decisions made during the course of a [qualitative research] project" (pp.ix). [1]

This book is a highly accessible, "user-friendly" introduction to the issues surrounding the quality of qualitative research. The title itself opens up a far-reaching debate about why and how we should question the robustness and efficacy of qualitative approaches. This book eases us into this debate, and offers us both theoretical and practical ways of evaluating research design methods, the data created out of those methods, analytic techniques and finally, the interpretation of findings of data. [2]

## 2. Overview of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. Part I covers General Considerations relating to quality of research. It discusses the philosophical, political and methodological issues which are considered to determine the decisions that social researchers make in the research process. There are chapter on: Why quality matters, Post-scientific critiques, Trust, truth and philosophy, and finally on Guiding Ideals. Part II addresses Research Practice in which discussion is based around examples of research practice, and an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of these scenarios. It has chapters on: Converging on a point, Accounting for contradiction, Grounding theory, Generalising from qualitative research, Using

numbers, Reliability and replicability, Reflexivity and writing, and Reinstating the author. [3]

### 3. Highlights

The structure and layout of the book is easy to navigate—for example, at the end of each chapter there is a concise conclusion (never more than a single page) and a summary of key points discussed, which are conveniently highlighted in a shaded table. At the end of the book are two appendices: one on "Criteria for the Evaluation of Qualitative Research Papers", containing a useful set of initial questions to pose, and another setting out discursive exercises relating to each chapter. [4]

Apart from its inherent readability, I found three other attractive features about the book: First is the use of exemplars based on case studies from qualitative studies, including WHYTE's *Street Corner Society*; second, is the quotes from key methodological texts reflecting on a range of qualitative research traditions; and third, is the use of philosophical argument and reference in the book which provided an added depth to the debate, often lacking in more practically orientated books. These deliberations take readers to a higher plane, whilst still allowing the novice to philosophy to gain an insight into theory. [5]

### 4. Extending Methods of Evaluating Quality

From my own point of view, I would have liked to have seen more discussion relating to examining research findings by examining the raw data arising out of the project(s). This is alluded to in the section on Showing Data in Part II, but the discussion is framed in terms of whether showing data to the reader of a report would be of any great value. [6]

The author also cites an example of a re-study of Margaret MEAD's study of Samoa, carried out by FREEMAN, which refuted MEAD's finding, albeit after her death. As SEALE points out, the re-study was not a true replication. Few re-studies using social science research methods could ever use identical methods, thereby rendering the studies and data not strictly comparable. However, SEALE does not suggest in the argument that that an examination of Mead's raw data from the original study may have helped the "revisitor" to examine MEAD's research perspective. [7]

I believe that one way of helping establish the validity and reliability of a report or book arising out of qualitative research is to have the chance to view or rework the raw data myself. I have been working within an environment which has tried to both establish and maintain a framework for allowing this ([Qualidata](#)). Whilst the majority of the research community has been very welcoming to the idea of sharing and re-using qualitative data, there is still a staunch caucus out there who believe that it is wrong—for personal, ethical or epistemological reasons. For some, opening up their work to scrutiny is not an attractive proposition. [8]

The more transparent we can make the research process in qualitative research the more credible it will become. Clive SEALE's book is a step in the right direction. I hope quantitative researchers will take the time to read it too. [9]

## Author

*Louise CORTI* is currently the Deputy Director and Manager of Qualidata, the ESRC Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre, based at Essex. In January 2001 she will be taking up the post of Director of User Service of the UK Data Archive, where alongside the duties of that role, she expect to retain an overall responsibility for qualitative data archives.

In the past she has taught sociology, social research methods and statistics, and spent six years working on the design, implementation and analysis of the British Household Panel Study at the University of Essex. She is currently authoring a virtual tutorial for social research methods and co-editing the next Issue 3 of *FQS*—the first ever journal issue entirely to qualitative data archiving! She sees herself as a methodologist and is interested in both qualitative and quantitative aspects of social research.

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