

Review:

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**Marilyn Lichtman (2023). Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide** (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge; 978-1-03-225174-5, \$48.99 (US)

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**Abstract:** LICHTMAN's 4th edition of "Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide" is a timely and clearly-written text that both new and experienced researchers will find useful. Although the title and many of the examples in the text relate to education, this book has applicability across different areas of qualitative inquiry. What is especially appealing is that the book is broken into three distinct phases: 1. Traditions, theory, and practice; 2. Planning your research; 3. Collecting, organizing, and communicating. These sections build on each other and this results in readers being able to actually plan and conduct their own qualitative inquiries. Readers will also find that the examples used throughout the text as well as the appendices complement the clear writing and explicit instruction. For all of these reasons, this text deserves serious consideration for any curriculum where qualitative inquiry is an essential component.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important characteristics of a review is that it is "independent," meaning relatively free of undue influence on the honesty of the review. For example, if the reviewer is a friend of the author, there is a possibility that what is written may be biased towards a favorable review. In fact, I am a friend of Marilyn LICHTMAN but let me first explain how this friendship came about which may alleviate some concerns about possible bias. [1]

I began teaching qualitative research to doctoral students about 15 years ago. What is a bit strange about this is that I was actually trained as a quantitative researcher in my doctoral program but I "inherited" the qualitative course when I was hired to replace a faculty member who left to teach elsewhere. Although I had published a few articles that might loosely be called qualitative, my mindset in

terms of scholarly inquiry was based on the quantitative or "rationalistic" paradigm (GUBA, 1981). Thus, needless to say, I looked for resources to help me navigate the new waters of qualitative inquiry for the course that I was now required to teach. This is when I came across the 2nd edition of LICHTMAN's "User's Guide" and continued using this text for my doctoral class up to and including the third edition (LICHTMAN, 2013) [2]

### **1.1 Initial impressions**

The first thing that struck me about this book was the clear and understandable writing that immediately resonated with me. Although I had explored other books about qualitative inquiry such as CRESWELL and POTH (2018), LICHTMAN's book read like a conversation where I could engage with the author and with my students about important and fundamental concepts and questions about qualitative research. My enchantment with this book led me to contact Marilyn LICHTMAN via e-mail and we met as a follow-up at the second annual [The Qualitative Report Conference](#) where I discovered that the author was isomorphic with the book; i.e., genuine, caring, and intellectually stimulating. Our friendship was built upon the book and not vice versa and thus I think that I can offer an "objective" review based on the quality of the 4th edition of her book. [3]

### **1.2 Incorporation into Instruction**

I used LICHTMAN' "User's Guide" 3rd edition as the mainstay of my course in qualitative inquiry up until I retired in December, 2022. During those years, I can unequivocally say that LICHTMAN's book was highly-valued by students because of its ability to connect with them as novice researchers. Since students in this program only had one qualitative course, it was important that they were exposed to multiple ways of learning about our evolving appreciation for qualitative approaches to understanding more about our world. The volume by LICHTMAN opened up perspectives and appreciations for students in a way that they very much needed and valued as they progressed in the program and began their dissertation research. [4]

## **2. About the Book**

### **2.1 Important characteristics**

I fully-expected LICHTMAN's 4th edition to retain the clarity and readability as the previous editions and I was not disappointed. What I did not expect were the up-to-date characteristics including its incorporation of lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially how technology was adapted to meet the needs of learners and likewise how learners and researchers adapted to how to use technology more effectively. Although this text focuses on education, I believe that its lessons can be extended across the physical and social sciences especially within the context of our growing use of mixed methods. [5]

One of the first things I noticed was how the three sections of the new edition—Part I: Traditions, theory, and practice; Part II: Planning your research; and Part III: Collecting, organizing, and communicating—are easily and seamlessly assimilated and integrated into actual practice. LICHTMAN has taken the headings and organization of previous editions and, based on her continuing thinking and exploring qualitative inquiry, has molded an approach that is fresh, stimulating, and useful. [6]

### **2.2 Appendices**

Although it may seem counter intuitive to start at the end, the Appendices (which were not present in the 3rd edition) require special mention because they offer both instructors and students valuable resources for planning and conducting qualitative inquiry. For example, Appendix A offers an informative comparison of qualitative and quantitative methods from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. I think that readers will find the tables especially useful since the "comments" enable us to reflect on what differences between methods actually mean by going beyond only description. The five other Appendices offer concrete advice for collecting data via interviews and observation which are the two mainstays of qualitative inquiry. The one area that is lacking is how to use artifacts as sources of data which I personally came to appreciate in one of my articles where my eyes were opened to the value of objects and artifacts (BERNAUER, 2019). However, the guidance provided regarding interviews and observation more than compensates for this omission. [7]

## 2.3 Book sections

Book sections harken back to the comments made earlier about how the book is broken into three sections. I think it is important for readers to recognize that because qualitative inquiry is both a complex undertaking and one that continues to evolve, other ways to organize a book such as this are certainly possible. In fact, it is because of the value that we place on the individual's construction and re-construction of knowledge and where "generalizability" is not as hallowed as in quantitative inquiry that I value LICHTMAN's approach. It offers us a clear way to conceptualize what we are trying to do and this is especially needed by students who are just beginning their scholarly journeys. The important thing is that I find the demarcations to be a valuable heuristic for actually helping readers to conceptualize and go about planning, conducting, and "making meaning" from their research efforts. [8]

### *Part I: Traditions, theory, and practice*

The first part with its five chapters helps both new and seasoned researchers to appreciate the context in which we work. LICHTMAN's first-person style in the "Overview of the field" immediately immerses the reader in the fundamental ideas and understandings that we sometimes take for granted, such as different ways of thinking and how we position ourselves in the role of researcher. Her ten "Key elements of qualitative research" conveniently presented in sequential boxes sets the stage for understanding what follows and is especially helpful to beginning researchers. In the following chapters of this section, LICHTMAN completes the reader's grounding in qualitative inquiry by demonstrating through clear explanations and examples how to become a qualitative researcher, ethical issues, reflexivity and subjectivity, and culminating in a discussion of philosophy, theories, and frameworks. This last chapter in this section is especially useful since it discusses how theories differ in qualitative and quantitative research which I think will be especially helpful to masters and doctoral students as they work on their theses and dissertations. [9]

### *Part II: Planning your research*

Part II of the book is all about helping readers build upon the foundations discussed in Part I and actually go about both planning and designing qualitative inquiries. Just like in Part I, there are five chapters which begin with helping readers first identify possible topics and areas of interest. I have found that students often struggle to find areas of inquiry that are grounded both in the individual's own interests and motivations which are practical to do, and potentially contributing in a significant way to the body of literature. LICHTMAN also advises researchers and potential researchers of the importance of doing "something" rather than planning ad infinitum. While this emphasis on doing may seemingly contradict planning first, LICHTMAN explains through stories what my own father told me years ago "do something even if it is wrong"! In retrospect, I would probably amend this advice to perhaps "do something even if it turns out wrong." While planning is absolutely necessary, we eventually need to strike out

and "learn by doing" even if we end up literally "striking out" as happened to me when I tried to conduct my own first qualitative study where unfortunately my participant who agreed to be an informant on the topic of expertise decided not to participate. It was a very disappointing experience but one that later energized me to move forward with my work. The following chapters in the second part envelop readers into the purpose of the review of the literature, the role of technology, and culminates with two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10) on research design. Chapter 9 provides description and explanation of the major designs in qualitative inquiry (ethnography, grounded theory methodology, phenomenology, case study, narrative inquiry, action research) while Chapter 10 provides examples of these designs and thus puts more flesh on the bones of research design. After reading Part II, readers should come away with both an enhanced understanding of how to go about conducting qualitative inquiry as well as an increased sense of self-efficacy that they can be successful! [10]

### *Part III: Collecting, organizing, and communicating*

The last part of the book offers readers understandable and practical ways to both collect data as well as to achieve that elusive goal of analyzing and making sense of qualitative data. Or, as AGAR (1980, p.189) put it: "It is time now to worry about something that has been implicit throughout the discussion of methodology [...] those mysterious procedures by which you transform what you see and hear into intelligible accounts." There is no question that "making meaning" as LICHTMAN coins it is where students and researchers struggle most. Chapter 12 describes and provides examples for how to collect data via interviews, observation, and documents and in enough detail that I think will enable readers to actually go about collecting their own data. It is in Chapter 13 "Making meaning from your data" where the AGAR quote above becomes most relevant. While there is not an in-depth treatment of specific analytical methods such as used in grounded theory or phenomenological designs, there is enough to get a grounding in these specific techniques and LICHTMAN points readers to seminal additional resources. She also provides examples for analyzing qualitative data including one that is based on an interview with Neil ARMSTRONG, a retired US astronaut which I think will be very useful for novice researchers. However, what I found to be most useful in this section is LICHTMAN's own simple yet effective strategy for coding and "making meaning" which she calls "The three Cs: Coding, categorizing, and concepts." Thankfully, LICHTMAN carries this approach forward from the previous edition because I have found through my years of teaching that it serves as both an algorithm as well as a heuristic to help students gain a sense of self-efficacy for coding and making sense of qualitative data. In Chapter 14, LICHTMAN gives guidance for how to both write-up and present the results of qualitative inquiry. As noted at the beginning of this review, it was the clarity of writing in LICHTMAN's previous editions that led to our meeting and becoming both friends and colleagues, and this clarity shines through when she explains and demonstrates to readers how to go about achieving these same kinds of effective communication skills. Finally, in the final chapter (Thinking about the future) LICHTMAN draws on her own extensive experience and connects the past to both current and future trends.

Technology is a primary component here but I think that readers will feel like they have gained a great deal of wisdom from "listening" to LICHTMAN as she concludes her most valuable text. [11]

### 3. Evaluation

Based on my experience with doctoral students, "making meaning" from qualitative data is indeed the most challenging task that they encounter. LICHTMAN does a brilliant job of focusing students on the important and simplifying data analysis and interpretation while still celebrating the complexity of qualitative inquiry. I found that the "Three Cs: Coding, categorizing, and concepts" help students to take charge of the "mysterious procedures" that AGAR (1980) referred to and that in itself is a major contribution. [12]

I fully anticipate that future instructors and students will be able to work through this text and finish it with the ability to not only conceptualize and carry out a research study but be able to do so with confidence and a mindset that qualitative inquiry offers us an exciting journey for understanding phenomena which impact us as well as our world. In summary, I have no doubt that students and teachers as well as those who simply want to get some fresh insights into qualitative inquiry will find this latest edition to be well-worth reading. I know that I continue to draw new insights from it and give it my highest recommendation. [13]

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