Review:

Iain Lang

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Abstract: This book is thorough and thoughtful in its treatment of the basic elements of qualitative research. Writing for an audience whose members have yet to undertake any research of their own, the authors focus on the holistic nature of qualitative research projects, emphasizing the importance of making congruent the processes of research design, making and analyzing data, and abstracting from them. The book is an excellent primer on qualitative research, but given that there are a number of other such books around, choosing between them is likely to be done on the basis of personal preference: choose this one if you would like to, or are happy to, learn about NVivo software and how to work with this in planning and conducting your research.

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1. Introduction

This book's title suggests its intended audience. *Readme First* is aimed at those who have not yet begun researching, but who are thinking about, or intending to, conduct a piece of qualitative research. Such readers are encouraged by the authors to use this book as an introduction to a range of qualitative methods and to qualitative thinking, and are walked through the stages—finding a topic, identifying an approach, designing the research, making and analyzing the data, writing up, and so on—that typically form part of a qualitative research project. Reflecting this introductory aim, the authors warn that: "This book is designed to be read like a novel—it has a story" (p.10) and that skipping parts of the story may hamper the reader's understanding. This is a good point, and new researchers will benefit from learning about the elements that make up a piece of research from beginning to end. [1]

2. Overview

The book has three main parts, which respectively deal with thinking about and planning research, collecting and analyzing data, and reflecting on your research and proceeding to write up. A fourth part provides a useful discussion of practical preparatory issues such as estimating a timetable, preparing a budget and getting ethical approval, and some ideas about what to do if you can't get started, but at around twenty pages is rather slight. [2]

The first part is called "Thinking Research" and provides a good discussion of what qualitative research is and is not, and of the circumstances under which one should (and should not) think about undertaking qualitative research. The integrity of qualitative research is emphasized, in particular the purposefulness of qualitative research and the importance of methodological congruence: that is, making sure that research questions, data and analyses fit together well, and ensuring that the aims of a project and the means of achieving them don't come adrift. Here, as throughout, the authors exhort readers to reflect on how they approach their research, in terms of how their methods, strategies and techniques fit together. For the most inexperienced researchers, they offer commendable advice: take courses if you can, read introductory texts with a critical eye and speak to researchers about their work and how they conducted it. [3]

MORSE and RICHARDS introduce the reader to three key methods of qualitative research—phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory. (I call these "methods" because that is what the authors call them: CRESWELL [1998] calls these [along with biography and case study] "traditions of inquiry," and "approaches" is probably the term I would have used.) As they proceed, they discuss the similarities and differences between these methods in relation to "the generic processes of coding, categorizing, and theme-ing" (p.44). They repeatedly return to and re-emphasize the theme of "methodological congruence." [4]

The biggest section is the second, "Inside Analysis." This covers the "guts" of a lot of qualitative inquiry: making data, coding it and abstracting from it. The authors are correct in pointing out that the second and third of these three elements are often passed over in published work, making it hard for novice researchers to see clearly what is going on or to make connections between what they are taught or read and what seems to be happening in published work. This is the section that relates to some of the book's distinctive features—those involving the accompanying CD and the tutorials it contains—and I return to it below. [5]

In the third part the authors discuss validity and reliability, and provide a worthwhile run-through of issues such as conducting an appropriate literature review, ensuring you use and continue to reflect on the suitability of methods, and putting together an audit trail and project history. In other words, they focus on a subject sometimes skirted around in qualitative research, that of rigor. They then discuss the writing-up process, in terms which could usefully be applied to all

types of research. As well as dealing with details such as how to use your data effectively and the importance of protecting participants, they make clear that writing up should be part of the whole of research. The only element they don't mention here is dissemination—as BARNES et al. (2003) have recently discussed, this is part of the process which could be stressed more. [6]

So far, so straightforward: this book offers a sound starting point for newcomers to qualitative research, discussing how one would proceed through the main elements involved and how this procession might differ according to the approach one used. The authors are eminent researchers and their book is, as we might expect, thorough and well-balanced. [7]

3. Additional Resources

There are two other aspects of this book to which it is worth paying attention. The first is the suggested reading resources, supplied at the end of each chapter. Most works have a bibliography or reading list, of course, but these reading resources impress through being relevant and up-to-date; where appropriate, they are grouped by topic or annotated. In the context of the authors' advice to do as much reading-around as possible before starting research, they make sense. [8]

The other noteworthy aspect, and the one which is more obvious on picking up the book for the first time, is the inclusion of a CD containing a demonstration version of NVivo. This is not new: for example, *The NVivo Qualitative Project Book* by Patricia BAZELEY and Lyn RICHARDS, had the same thing. (Lyn RICHARDS has been a principal developer of the NUD*IST/NVivo series from its inception.) That book seems to be about using NVivo to do qualitative research; *Readme First* is more about the process of doing qualitative research, in which process NVivo is suggested (and provided) as a tool for learning and working. (I have not read the earlier book and rely on Marilyn LICHTMAN's excellent review in *FQS* 2(3) for this information.) [9]

The CD is referred to in four tutorials in the course of the book, intended to guide the participating reader through the different stages of designing a project, producing and handling data, employing different types of coding, and working with concepts and ideas. Since the reader is not presumed to have done any of her or his own research, the tasks involved relate to data from two projects which are supplied (although they could also be done with other data). The tutorials are well explained and contextualized. [10]

What is not clear is what a newcomer, having worked through these tutorials, would learn about qualitative research rather than learning about qualitative research by using NVivo itself. MORSE and RICHARDS emphasize the need for researchers to reflect at all stages of conducting research and to use tools in ways that fit with their questions, methods and aims. The place of software in this, they suggest, is "as a resource for the researcher, never a substitute for the research method and the research mind" (p.239). They also indicate that other software packages are available and refer readers to sources of information

about such packages—for example, the CAQDAS website. Although they don't name any of those packages or refer to how they differ in range of application, ways of organizing data or outcomes, it would be asking a lot of an introductory text like this to refer to multiple software packages and to compare them in epistemological or even functional terms. However, reflective readers might want to know about discussions over how using qualitative data analysis software may influence the direction and outcomes of research, or even just be made aware that such discussions have taken place (see e.g. STALLER 2002). [11]

It is good to see a discussion of a range of methods, since NVivo and similar packages have occasionally in the past been thought of as implicitly promoting approaches using grounded theory. At the same time, though MORSE and RICHARDS refer to a range of data types and how these might be handled, the general impression one gets—from the text and from the sample projects on CD —is that qualitative data are usually semi-structured individual or group interview transcriptions. However, NVivo is probably mostly used for handling this type of data, and such data are probably the bulk of what is identified as qualitative. [12]

In summary: this book is well-written and well-balanced in its treatment of the basics of qualitative research. The authors promote a view of a qualitative research project as a cohesive whole, emphasizing the interconnectedness of research design, making and analyzing data, and abstracting from them; they also encourage novice researchers to read widely and to look critically at current research. *Readme First* covers the basic ground well; whether you prefer it to any one or more of the various other introductory qualitative textbooks available is likely to be a matter of taste as much as anything. As long as you (or your students) are happy to go along with an NVivo-flavored introduction, this book should serve as an excellent primer on qualitative inquiry and learning to think qualitatively. [13]

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Author

Iain LANG's research interests include social
network analysis, the rhetoric of social science
and relational sociology. He is currently at the
Division of Social Statistics, University of
Southampton, UK where he is an MSc student and
Research Fellow on the ESRC National Centre for
Research Methods Consultation.

Contact:

Dr. Iain Lang

Division of Social Statistics
School of Social Sciences
University of Southampton
Southampton SO17 1BJ
UK

E-mail: ial203@soton.ac.uk

Citation