

Book Review: Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide, 2nd Edition, by Rose Barbour

In this book, **Rose Barbour** sets out to provide a clear, user-friendly introduction to the craft of doing qualitative research. The author's writing style and the inclusion of numerous anecdotes from her own research, simultaneously demystify qualitative research whilst reiterating the expertise and skill which researchers must possess, writes **Christina Dobson**. Christina recommends this book to anyone undertaking qualitative research, postgraduate students in particular.



Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide (2nd Edition). Rose Barbour. SAGE Publications. November 2013.

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In this second edition of *Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide*, [Rose Barbour](#) guides the reader through the qualitative research journey, in what is arguably one of the most comprehensive guides available. Barbour is a medical sociologist, whose expertise in qualitative research methods, and, in particular, focus groups, has meant that she is highly regarded both within her field and beyond. This text draws together her experiences of undertaking, supervising and teaching qualitative research methods to provide an extensive introduction to qualitative research, perfectly pitched for postgraduate students.

The book is well structured, with the chapters divided into four sections: Part I provides an introduction to the field of qualitative research; Part II discusses data generation; Part III considers complex research designs in practice; and finally, Part IV explores data analysis, theorising, and presentation.

The first section of the book introduces the qualitative research tradition, exploring its emergence within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and discussing its development and adoption in other disciplines. Barbour outlines the paradigmatic position of qualitative research and the philosophical suppositions of different qualitative traditions, whilst acknowledging that the similarities and overlap between different traditions can often cause confusion. Barbour suggests that adopting a hybrid approach can enable the researcher to explore multiple aspects of an issue, such as the *micro* and the *macro*, which individual traditions can constrain the researcher in achieving.

One of the most interesting points of discussion, for me, was about personal motivation and research strategy. The issue of researcher bias – that is, how *you* may affect your research through your own inherent qualities and experiences – is a long-established section in most qualitative research texts, which encourages the researcher to be reflexive about how they may have shaped participant's responses and data analysis. Barbour progresses this discussion by considering how individual dispositions not only affect fieldwork and analysis, but also the selection of research questions and approaches. This is illustrated beautifully by a story told by the renowned anthropologist Cecil Helman, wherein two children are watching the leaves falling from a tree: one child is drawn to counting and calculating leaf loss, whereas the other is drawn to pondering the context in which this particular tree is losing its leaves. This natural disposition to examine phenomenon through particular lenses highlights how some individuals are naturally drawn to qualitative research, and others to quantitative research, a fact which Barbour argues has often been overlooked.



CIFOR scientist George Schoneveld interviews jatropha farmers reportedly abandoned by an overly-ambitious outgrower scheme. Credit: [CIFOR CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

The chapter on research design offers detailed and thoughtful advice, from the more obvious points about methodology and sampling strategies, to highly practical advice about ensuring you have the right research team and the timetabling of qualitative research. The chapter on ethics is refreshingly realistic about the processes and obstacles of obtaining ethical approval, particularly when conducting research in areas for which multiple committees must be approached for approval, such as the NHS. Barbour manages to make the sometimes dry subject of ethics engaging and fresh, by avoiding the frequently cited examples of unethical research and instead drawing upon less commonly used studies.

The book offers a lot of practical support in relation to undertaking research, and the inclusion of personal stories and numerous sections of transcripts help to make the qualitative process more tangible. In particular, examples when things didn't go quite to plan are particularly helpful – for instance when the author details how she unintentionally asked a leading question in an interview. By including such an example, the author provides significant reassurance for the novice qualitative researcher, as knowing that even some of the most experienced researchers make mistakes and that they recover from these will provide comfort when the researcher will invariably make some small mistakes during their first tentative steps into fieldwork.

The need for qualitative researchers to justify the robustness of their research and validity of their findings has long been an issue and, is arguably the main reason for the development of grounded theory. In order to address the criticisms directed at qualitative research, many researchers have attempted to deconstruct the method when presenting their findings in academic papers. However, Barbour argues that, in doing so, such work undermines and belies the skill of the qualitative researcher. It is reassuring to see a criticism of the over simplified presentation of qualitative methods, however, it highlights the progress which remains to be made in the acceptance of qualitative methodology by the wider scientific body.

Another interesting discussion point is about interviewing 'elites' such as politicians or CEOs and some of the potential problems this may pose. This is an important and timely subject for consideration, as much existing social science research has tended to focus on 'the underdog' and the vulnerable within society. Maybe one of the

best ways to support the enactment of change for the groups we may have traditionally studied is to go on to study the groups who hold the power to enact such changes, and explore some of the potential barriers to change which exist.

There are so many fascinating discussions within this book that it is difficult to do the text justice in this brief review. Barbour's writing style and inclusion of numerous anecdotes from her own and her students' research help to bring the topic of qualitative research to life for the reader. She simultaneously demystifies qualitative research whilst reiterating the expertise and skill which qualitative researchers must possess. For anyone who undertakes qualitative research – postgraduate students in particular – this book would be an indispensable addition to the bookshelf.

Christina Dobson is a PhD student in the School of Medicine, Pharmacy and Health at Durham University, for which she is looking at the effect of social support on time to presentation among patients with colorectal or respiratory symptoms. Christina has been involved in a number of studies within the department, prior to commencing her PhD, which have largely focused on the early diagnosis of cancer. [Read more reviews by Christina.](#)

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