

Book Reviews

Margaret Rohdy, Editor

Qualitative Research for the Information Professional: A Practical Handbook. G. E. Gorman and Peter Clayton, with contributions from Mary Lynn Rice-Lively and Lyn Gorman. London: Library Association Publishing, 1997. 287p. £35 (ISBN 1-85604-178-6).

The complexity of libraries and other information environments points to an increasing need for structured inquiry into the purposes, operations, and users of those environments. In order to gain the fullest and richest understanding of some aspects of libraries, especially those aspects related to library use and users, qualitative methods may be most applicable. This is the premise of *Qualitative Research for the Information Professional*.

The authors begin with a statement of purpose: "First, it is aimed specifically at researchers and practitioners in information organizations, whether libraries, archives, records management centres or any other type of information service provider. . . . Second, the work is unashamedly in the 'how-to-do-it' mould, with only passing attention to historical and theoretical prolegomena characteristic of many qualitative research texts" (p. 14). The second caveat should not dissuade librarians from using this work as an aid to conducting qualitative research. In fact, the practical nature of the book makes it a very effective companion to a more abstract text. The above statements make it seem that the work is devoid of theoretical context; but in fact, the authors provide a concise background for the application of qualitative methods by discussing the nature of qualitative research: what it seeks to accomplish, when it might be best applied, how it differs

from quantitative research, and how it can be employed in information environments. While this discussion is not lengthy, it does assist the reader in placing qualitative methods in the larger scheme of research in general; and it emphasizes the point that, though qualitative methods do not incorporate inferential statistics, they can be sufficiently rigorous to address detailed and complicated research questions. Much of what takes place in information environments is behavioral and social in nature; the methods and techniques described in this book present structured mechanisms for investigating questions that are not easily reduced to statistics.

The authors offer comprehensive suggestions for the design of a research project. Some of these may seem intuitive, but it is essential that each phase of design be explicit. One of their helpful guides covers the construction of a project timetable. This element is important because many researchers, especially those relatively new to qualitative methods, need to be aware of the time required for gaining background information, observation, fieldwork, interpretation, and all of the other steps in a project. A detailed timetable is invaluable in accounting for every phase of the project and estimating how much time each will require. Because much qualitative research takes place in a natural environment rather than in a laboratory or other experimental setting, there are factors external to the researchers and internal to the locus of inquiry to consider. For instance, the authors point out that permissions may be required and waivers obtained before observation can begin.

The book includes a substantial amount of material on the actual con-

duct of qualitative inquiry. In their detailed discussion of direct observation, a frequently used information-gathering technique, the authors offer tips that researchers can use to place themselves in the context of the setting, conduct themselves once in that setting, and record what occurs during observation. With regard to the last, the authors address concerns of reliability and validity in a naturalistic setting. They account for different types of reliability and validity, suggesting ways to ensure both and noting that these concerns may manifest themselves differently in qualitative and quantitative inquiry.

The interview is a principal information-gathering technique in qualitative research. The authors include detailed discussion of various ways individual and group interviews may be designed and conducted. Of special interest is their coverage of how to record interview data and how to ensure full and accurate accounts of the results of interviews. They include advice to the interviewer on how to prepare; what sorts of probes to interject, and when; how to ensure clear understanding of questions asked; and how to elicit responses. Moreover, the authors discuss both the advantages and the shortcomings of this means of information gathering. Not only do they illustrate the strengths of the method; they also point out pitfalls and ways to avoid them.

Perhaps the most helpful element of this book is the inclusion of what the authors call "research scenarios." These concrete examples of project design and the conduct of studies, mostly taken from the authors' own research experiences, describe the steps undertaken in carrying out projects and point out problems and pitfalls. The scenarios place this discussion very clearly in applied settings illustrating the rigor of the methods employed, the importance of planning, and the value of the methods in answering particular questions. These scenarios are interspersed throughout each chapter. Because this book is intended to be a practical guide, its success should be judged according to the practicality of its content. The research scenar-

ios help to make the work a tool that can be used successfully, especially by a less-experienced researcher.

The authors state at the outset that this book is not an academic exercise. Still, there is the need for reference to additional sources that cover in greater detail some of the specific elements of qualitative methods. The authors weave these references into each section of the book by presenting specific examples of the methods and their application, and also by including at the end of each chapter a brief presentation of additional sources and their utility. This is important because no single text can supply everything the aspiring researcher will need to know. The items referred to are very well chosen and complement the discussion of each chapter admirably.

Readers seeking answers to some of the thorny questions that arise in libraries will find this book an excellent guide to qualitative methods of inquiry. There is nothing insular about this work by British authors, published in London by the Library Association; it has applicability to library environments everywhere. Consulting the book can assuredly save a researcher's time and prevent pitfalls in the conduct of any formal research.—*John M. Budd (libsjmb@showme.missouri.edu), School of Information Science and Learning Technologies, University of Missouri-Columbia.*

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