



The Qualitative Report

Volume 15 | Number 4

Book Review 16

7-1-2010

Theoretical Considerations in Qualitative Interviewing

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Recommended APA Citation

Cooper, R. (2010). Theoretical Considerations in Qualitative Interviewing. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(4), 1002-1005. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss4/16>

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Abstract

You might expect a book on interviewing in qualitative research to focus solely on the procedures of conducting interviews; however, in *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory & Practice*, Kathryn Roulston (2010) offers this perspective and much more. In particular, her new book addresses ways in which the researcher's theoretical perspective can inform not only the interview but also each stage of the research process. This thoughtful, well-written text also includes at the end of each chapter helpful suggestions of further reading and activities that relate to the chapter's topic.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Interviewing, Reflexivity, and Theoretical Assumptions

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Theoretical Considerations in Qualitative Interviewing

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*You might expect a book on interviewing in qualitative research to focus solely on the procedures of conducting interviews; however, in *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory & Practice*, Kathryn Roulston (2010) offers this perspective and much more. In particular, her new book addresses ways in which the researcher's theoretical perspective can inform not only the interview but also each stage of the research process. This thoughtful, well-written text also includes at the end of each chapter helpful suggestions of further reading and activities that relate to the chapter's topic. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Interviewing, Reflexivity, and Theoretical Assumptions*

You might expect a book on interviewing in qualitative research to focus solely on the procedures of conducting interviews; however, in *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory & Practice*, Kathryn Roulston (2010) offers this perspective and much more. In particular, her new book addresses ways in which the researcher's theoretical perspective can inform not only the interview but also each stage of the research process. Whether speaking of the design of a study, the transcription of an interview, or one of many other steps involved in qualitative research, Roulston reminds readers that the choices and decisions of researchers are influenced by their theoretical assumptions. While this process often occurs in an unconscious way, she explains how researchers may be benefited by actively taking their theoretical views into account as they make decisions throughout their research process. She notes,

By considering the underlying assumptions of 'neo-positivist,' 'romantic,' 'constructionist,' 'postmodern,' 'transformative,' and 'decolonizing' conceptions of the qualitative interview, I argue that researchers will be better prepared to design research projects to use interviews in ways that are consistent with their epistemological and theoretical assumptions about knowledge production....How we think about the qualitative interview has implications for how interviews are structured, the kinds of questions posed, and how data are analyzed and represented. (p. 51)

Not surprisingly, Roulston (2010) devotes several chapters of the book specifically to interviewing. In the opening chapter, she addresses the kinds of questions used in individual interviews, and makes helpful distinctions between approaches to interviewing depending upon whether one is conducting a phenomenological, ethnographic, feminist, oral history, or dialogical interview. This first chapter concludes with helpful suggestions for further reading, as well as several activities that will help novice researchers explore these different types of interviews. This inclusion of suggested readings and activities is a valuable feature of the text that Roulston continues

in every chapter. In the second chapter, she summarizes various types of group interviewing and provides detailed guidance regarding focus groups, making this chapter a useful resource for anyone considering a study incorporating this methodology. In chapter 5, Roulston covers the steps involved in a study using interviews—from gaining consent, through recruiting participants and scheduling interviews, on to conducting, recording, and transcribing the interviews.

Beyond the material covered in these chapters, which readers might expect to find in a text on interviewing, Roulston (2010) includes other material that sets the book apart. For example, in chapter 7, she shows how researchers can apply the methods of Conversation Analysis to their interview transcripts for the express purpose of sensitizing themselves to what they say and do in interviews and how this pattern of behavior may impact data generation. The contribution of this chapter seems rather unique to texts addressing qualitative interviewing. In addition, in the final chapter of the book, readers will find practical suggestions regarding how to deal with challenges they might encounter in qualitative interviewing, including dealing with topics that are sensitive to the researcher or to participants, or encountering difficulties in the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Roulston shares suggestions from several qualitative researchers based on their own experiences regarding how novice interviewers might handle these challenges.

While the chapters described above address different aspects of interviewing in qualitative research, other parts of the book apply to qualitative research in general, making the text especially helpful to novice researchers. In chapter 4, Roulston (2010) walks readers through the initial steps of designing a qualitative study. This information is relevant to anyone interested in conducting qualitative inquiry, whether or not they intend to employ interviewing. For example, Roulston describes several strategies researchers might utilize to identify the topics of their studies based on reviews of the literature, personal experience, and theoretical perspectives regarding social research, as well as simple curiosity and observation. In addition, she suggests,

Useful questions to ask of oneself as a researcher are, do I want to:

- Make predictions?
- Develop understanding?
- Promote transformation or social change?
- Make a long-term commitment to promoting decolonizing and social justice agendas?
- Deconstruct topics?

In this chapter, Roulston also speaks to other aspects of research design, including developing research questions, data generation, sampling strategies, and taking measures to ensure the study's reliability, or, to use the term she prefers, "quality".

In chapter 6, Roulston (2010) presents a thoughtful discussion of reflexivity in qualitative research. In the following excerpt, while Roulston refers to "interviewers," her words would apply to researchers in general:

Interviewers work in local contexts and are informed by their own and others' racial, ethnic, cultural, and national origins. Combined with the specificities of the class, gender, language abilities, status, age, and education—in addition to any number of other social locations—of both participant and researcher, and the extent and nature of their prior relationship, qualitative researcher projects each bear the unique imprints of the particular set of complex relationships and interactions that unfold. Thus, it is a useful move for qualitative researchers to critically consider their subject positions in relation to their research topic and those involved in their studies. (pp. 115-116)

Just as this chapter on reflexivity extends the value of the text beyond merely providing guidance on the process of interviewing, so too does chapter 7, in which Roulston provides an introduction to various approaches to qualitative data analysis and to representing the results of a qualitative study.

By combining these elements that offer helpful information regarding qualitative research in general as well as detailed specific guidance related to interviewing, Roulston (2010) has crafted a text that should appeal to a broad base of readers. The unifying thread that ties these different elements of the book together is the consistent reminder regarding the impact of the researcher's theoretical assumptions on every step of the research process. This thoughtful approach to research will benefit novice qualitative researchers, helping them to not only learn some of the procedures involved in research but also to bring critical reflection to their research studies.

To gain a first-hand appreciation of Roulston's (2010) fine book, I suggest you visit the [book's web page at Sage](#). There you can read chapter 1 in its entirety as well as a majority of the book's content through Sage's Google Preview feature. These preview options will give you a great feel for the wonderful way Roulston presents her perspective on interviewing from a theoretical point-of-view and how she makes this approach quite clear through her use of clear examples, helpful graphical displays, further reading suggestions, and practical activities.

References

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Author Note

Robin Cooper, Ph.D., serves as *The Weekly Qualitative Report's* Managing Editor and as an Associate Editor for *The Qualitative Report* and *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. She is an adjunct professor in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Nova Southeastern University's Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences and will be teaching in NSU's Graduate Certificate in Qualitative Research program starting in the summer of 2010. Robin's research interests include culture and ethnic conflict, national belonging, collective identity, gender and social control, and qualitative research. She

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Article Citation

Cooper, R. (2010). Theoretical considerations in qualitative interviewing. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(4), 1002-1005. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-4/roulston.pdf>
