Qualitative Research for the Information Professional. A Practical Handbook. Second Edition.

G. E. Gorman and Peter Clayton. *London: Facet Publishing, 2005. 304 pp. ISBN 1-85604-472-6. (hardback). £39.95.*

On the back of this text is a quote from a review of the first edition, from *Library and Information Research News*: 'I almost never unreservedly recommend a book in a review that I write. This book is an exception. Go buy it.' A strong recommendation indeed for a text regarding non-quantitative case study research on the behaviour of information seekers, and the workings of information institutions: but just how useful can a book on this topic be?

The text aims to serve as both as an introduction to, and a guide to how to undertake, Qualitative research, which is defined as

> a process of enquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur, in an attempt to describe these occurrences, as a means of determining the process in which events are embedded and the perspectives of those participating in the events, using induction to derive possible explanations based on observed phenomena. (p. 3)

Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, is then the generic approach to what can also be called interpretative research, ethnography, or case study research, where a case study is a manifestation of this generic approach, and fieldwork the means by which it is conducted. Through observation, interaction and enquiry, processes which underlie events can be understood, and the perspectives of those involved in the process ascertained. This can be a useful investigative technique to allow deeper understanding of processes (as opposed the numeric quantitative approach), eliciting rich responses and anecdotal data from those involved in the process under enquiry.

Chapter one maps out the nature of qualitative research, providing a definition, and the distinctive features of such research, differentiating it from quantitative research

and illustrating what it can contribute to the research process. Chapter two, on the evaluation of qualitative research, gives ==criteria to assess previously undertaken== qualitative research projects, and encourages the reader to develop a critical evaluation of published research in order to better understand and develop their own methodologies when beginning a programme of enquiry. Further chapters present the type of qualitative research design undertaken in information organizations, describing the preparatory work needed to undertake fieldwork. Individual chapters are devoted to each of observation, interviewing, and group discussion techniques. A chapter on recording fieldwork data gives an overview of the techniques used, covering error and bias in the process and how to avoid them, and a further chapter covers how to undertake data analysis of gathered data (including the use of computers in qualitative data analysis). A chapter on historical investigation (authored by Sydney J. Shep) discusses the nature of historical information, and the pitfalls that can await the unsuspecting researcher in the validity and coverage of historical data.

At the end of each chapter is a selected bibliography for further reading – giving descriptions of a few relevant texts, and illustrating why the researcher may find those useful. The final chapter is a selected bibliography presented as an indicative guide to a range of materials that usefully supplement the text, comprising of valuable generic texts as well as giving specific examples of research undertaken in research settings, covering, in total, the theoretical, methodological, and practical implementation of qualitative research.

For those familiar with the first edition, the second features two new chapters, one on the evaluation of qualitative research, and a case study: presenting a project report as an example of the way qualitative research may be undertaken and subsequently reported. References from the first edition have been updated, and more pointers to useful online resources are provided.

Although the examples and illustrations given are based on qualitative research in library and information studies environments, the text provides an overview of the main processes and techniques used while carrying out qualitative research. This is a useful starting point for anyone not familiar with the standard techniques who is about to undertake a research project which involves observation, case studies, or other non-

quantitative research methods. Additionally, the text is of use to anyone starting out on their research career – from the final year undergraduate undertaking their dissertation upwards. Most academic fields require some element of investigation and reporting as a BA or MA (or MSc) dissertation: the explanations and tips contained within this text are practical, manageable, and useful to those not familiar with approaching individuals or institutions in order to undertake research. For example, the chapter on observation details how the researcher should approach organisations for permission, how to place yourself in the organisation for best effect, how to verify your findings, how to interact with individuals, and issues of reliability. It also covers issues often overlooked on how the researcher should dress and behave (which may not be obvious to those not used to carrying out such research):

> If, in order to fit into the appropriate category, this means that you must wear smart, relatively formal clothes when you normally wear jeans and a threadbare jumper, then take time to adjust to the new way of dressing so that it does not feel uncomfortable and interfere with your observations. This is an important point. Many researchers in organizations tend to dress too casually. If in doubt, err on the side of formality – you can always take off your coat and roll up your sleeves. (p. 116)

Likewise, the tips on writing up research could be applicable to those undertaking the final stages of a dissertation, a thesis, or an academic article.

> To begin with, develop a detailed schedule and firm deadlines for your writing. Work backwards from when the completed product is due, and fit each chapter of section into a realistic time frame. Remember there will be holidays and other unavoidable delays in your writing schedule… (p. 229)

Such tips may be obvious to the seasoned researcher, but can provide a way through the task for those who are daunted by undertaking qualitative research for the first time – in any field.

Moreover, this test is eminently readable: the prose flows with a good dash of humour from the authors;

> One of the greatest disappointments in our lives as researchers is the unbearable pomposity of so many other researchers, who can be immodest, opinionated, jargon-driven, narrowly focussed and utterly without any awareness of the fun that can be derived from research. (p 1)

The style makes this text an approachable and non-confrontational starting point for those new to the processes and techniques of qualitative research.

Qualitative Research for the Information Professional is then a useful starting point, and rapidly becoming a standard reference point, for those who aim to undertake non-quantitative research. Through its flowing writing style, and its no-nonsense and thorough, practical advice to researchers, it provides an approachable, and useful, guide to how to begin, undertake, and write-up qualitative research, applicable to most academic fields. I almost never recommend that a book I review should be required reading for students about to carry out their first research project – this book is an exception. Add it to your reading lists. Buy it for your library. Make your students read it.

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