Qualitative research

in practice

STORIES

FROM THE

FIELD

YVONNE
DARLINGTON
and DOROTHY
SCOTT

Qualitative research in practice

Stories from the field

Yvonne Darlington and Dorothy Scott

ALLEN&UNWIN

For our fathers

Bernard Olsson Darlington
and
Arthur Henry Scott

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The researchers

Tim Booth is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Sheffield. He graduated in Sociology from the University of Essex and, after a spell as a research officer in a social services department, joined the University of Sheffield in 1975. His current research interests are parenting by people with learning difficulties, advocacy and supported parenting, narrative research with inarticulate informants and the uses of fictional methods in social research. He has published four books and numerous journal articles in the area of parents with learning difficulties. Much of his work in this area has been conducted jointly with Wendy Booth.

Wendy Booth is a Research Fellow in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. Wendy is involved in the field of parents with learning difficulties, as a researcher and an advocate. She has, with Tim Booth, published four books and numerous journal articles on their research with parents with learning difficulties and the children of parents with learning difficulties. She has also completed an action research project which provided advocacy support for parents with learning difficulties and is involved in a further project which offers supported learning opportunities to mothers with learning difficulties. She is the adviser to Huddersfield People First and writes a regular column in *Viewpoint*, the monthly newspaper of Mencap.

Anne Coleman began her professional social work career in 1990 as the social worker/welfare coordinator at an inner city drop-in centre for homeless people. Her work there was the start of an abiding interest in the issue of homelessness, and in understanding alternative discourses and meanings. As well as direct practice, grounded research and its links with policy processes and outcomes became central to her work. Anne completed her doctoral research on the meaning of public space to homeless people in an inner city area of Brisbane. She has been a research officer and lecturer in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Queensland and has recently taken up a position as Senior Policy Officer with the Department of Housing, Queensland. In this role, she maintains contact with homeless people in the inner city, and continues to be involved in policy and research relating to homelessness.

Yvonne Darlington lectures and researches in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Queensland. She has previously practised as a social worker in mental health and family law settings. Within the School, she teaches in the areas of child welfare, evaluation research and legal aspects of social work practice. She has completed qualitative research on adult women's experiences of having been sexually abused in childhood; worker, client and family experiences of hope in mental illness; young adults' experiences of having been the subject of contested Family Court proceedings as children; and child welfare workers' understandings of physical child abuse. She is currently involved in a project, Using Knowledge in Practice (UKIP), that is assisting child protection workers to develop skills in evidence-based practice.

Liz Kelly began researching in 1980 for her PhD on women's experience of violence. In 1987 she became the first staff member of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at the University of North London, and has worked there ever since. A feminist activist prior to becoming a researcher, she has continued to work in an unpaid capacity, either directly with women or as an activist, alongside her professional involvement in this issue. Her research interest in this area developed out of a dissatisfaction about the ways in which different forms of violence had become separated in research and in service provision, when these things are not separated in women's and children's lives, and this has been a continuing theme in her research. With her colleagues at the Unit, she has completed about

twenty-two different projects, mainly on child sexual abuse, domestic violence and rape.

Catherine McDonald lectures and researches in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Queensland. Her research interests are the non-profit human services sector, the mixed economy of welfare, the reconstruction of the welfare state and shifts in the institutional arrangements supporting people. Her professional background is in social work although she identifies more broadly as a person working in and around community human services. She has worked as a social worker in child protection, residential care and psychiatric social work, in Australia and Malaysia. She is the author of thirteen journal articles and several book chapters. Most of her writing is on the non-profit sector, the mixed economy of welfare, and theorising the reconstruction of welfare. She is currently engaged in several research projects, including a large research project on the reconstruction of the community services industry.

Robyn Munford is Head of the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University, Palmerston North. She has qualifications in both social work and sociology from Massey University and the University of Calgary. She has lectured extensively at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels on community development, disability services and policy, generic social work practice, feminism and social work, and qualitative methods. She has extensive research experience in the disability and family work fields. Her research interests include women and management, disability policy, family policy and effective strategies for achieving family change, as well as issues around the creation of environments conducive to the development of child and family well-being.

Jackie Sanders is the Research Director of the Barnardos Child and Family Research Centre in New Zealand. Jackie has management experience in the for-profit and health sectors and also in the provision of welfare and early childhood services to families. She is currently involved in several research projects which have children and families as their focus. The projects include research into factors that are associated with positive change in families seeking support from a home-based family support service, and community research

into factors associated with family well-being. These research programs are funded by the Public Good Science Fund—a government body which supports social science research in New Zealand.

Dorothy Scott is Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Melbourne and is currently on secondment as the Executive Director of the Ian Potter Foundation. Her academic background is in history and social work. Her practice and policy interests are in child welfare, mental health and maternal and child health. She has taught practice research at a postgraduate level in Australia and overseas, and has written seminal papers on epistemological and hermeneutic issues in social work. She has undertaken extensive qualitative research in the fields of child welfare history, maternal and child health, and child protection. Her current research interests are the history of child protection, and social support in the transition to motherhood. In 1999 she was awarded a medal of the Order of Australia for her contributions in the field of child abuse, post-partum psychiatric illness and social welfare education and research.

Caroline Thomas is a Research Fellow at Cardiff Law School, Cardiff University. She graduated in Social Policy from the University of Exeter in 1982. After working in the health service and voluntary sector, she joined Bristol University's Socio-Legal Centre for Family Studies in 1991, where she was involved in several studies to evaluate the *Children Act 1989*. Later she moved to Cardiff Law School to take the lead role in a study of older children's views and experiences of the adoption process. Caroline is currently on secondment to the UK Department of Health, managing the children's social care research program.

Cheryl Tilse is a lecturer and researcher in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Queensland. She has practised as a social worker in Australia and Canada in mental health, rehabilitation and corrective services. Within the School, she teaches in the areas of knowledge and practice, the organisational context of practice and practitioner research. Her research interests are in practitioner-based research, the organisational and policy context of practice and in ageing and aged care policy. Her current research includes evaluating housing options for older people, enhancing family and resident participation in aged care

facilities, the legal aspects of later life decision-making around health care and accommodation options, asset management and the financial abuse of older people, and the implementation of user charges in aged care services. She is a member of the editorial board of the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*.

Angelina Yuen-Tsang is currently Associate Head and Associate Professor of the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She obtained her BSocSc in Social Work from the University of Hong Kong in 1975, MSW from the University of Toronto in 1978, MEd from the University of Manchester in 1983, and her PhD from the University of Hong Kong in 1995. She is now the President of the Hong Kong Social Workers Association and is a board member of numerous social welfare organisations in Hong Kong. She is actively involved in the development of social work education in mainland China and in training social work educators in China. Her main research interest is on social support networks in Chinese communities using a grounded theory approach. She is conducting several research projects on social support networks of women, the elderly and the unemployed in China.

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Preface

In this book we aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice and between academic and practice contexts in qualitative research. We do this through the use of research practice narratives to illustrate stages of the research process. It is more a book about 'doing' research and 'being' a researcher than about 'how to' do research.

In Chapter 1 we begin with an exploration of the journey from practice to research—how to generate a research question and how some research questions that arise in the human services might best be explored through a qualitative research design. The ensuing chapters focus on specific stages of the research process, through data collection, analysis and writing up to, finally, the shift from research back to practice.

Chapter 2 addresses ethical issues and the organisational context of research.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus particularly on data collection. In Chapter 3 we consider in-depth interviewing and in Chapter 4, observation. Chapter 5 addresses challenges involved in interviewing children and people with an intellectual disability, exploring different ways in which research can be modified to better meet the needs of these groups of participants.

In Chapter 6 we consider some approaches to mixing qualitative and quantitative methods where one method alone cannot adequately address a research question. This is a common approach in the human services, where the issues researchers are faced with are often complex and multi-faceted.

In Chapter 7 we consider some data analysis processes that are common to many approaches to qualitative research. Chapter 8 focuses on presentation and writing up, exploring different ways of writing up research so that the findings can be communicated with different audiences. Finally, in Chapter 9 we conclude with the feedback loop which takes us from research findings back to practice and policy implications—as practice research is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The book provides an introduction to qualitative research, primarily through the medium of practice-based stories that illustrate particular stages of the research process. Each chapter includes at least two and often more 'stories from the field'. Thus the reader will not necessarily find 'the answer', but will discover how others have dealt with various aspects of qualitative research practice. This reflects our belief that there is great value in learning from others' experience. We hope the book will encourage creativity and, by showing how other researchers have dealt with particular issues, act as an aid to research troubleshooting. The book is thus also a showcase of the variety of qualitative research that is being done in different fields within the human services. By bringing these examples together, we hope to share them with a wider audience than the specific field to which each study belongs.

We have written the book for anyone with an interest in qualitative research, but particularly for students and practitioners in the human services. We hope the researcher perspectives we have presented will be of value to students and practitioner researchers alike, enabling them to draw on others' experience in the design of their own projects.

We were clear from the start that we wanted the book to include comments from researchers about how they do qualitative research. We envisaged not so much personal experiences about what it is like to be a qualitative researcher as comments about how researchers made their choices about what to do, and how the day-to-day research context interacts to shape what is possible. Through our discussions, this evolved into the idea of conducting in-depth interviews with researchers and including sections from those interviews in relevant chapters. We decided first what issues we wanted to include, and then sought out researchers who seemed to us to have grappled with at least one of those issues in an interesting or innovative way.

The work of all of the researchers included in the book was

known to us, either through personal contact or through their writing, and we chose each researcher deliberately, with a particular chapter of the book in mind. This reflected the reason we included them and focused the major part of the interview, but all the interviews were more broad-ranging than the one topic. In this way, we pre-selected the researchers to be included in the chapters on ethics and organisations, interviewing, observation, tailoring research to suit the needs of participants and mixed methods.

We decided to include excerpts from a selection of the researchers in the first and final chapters and in the chapters on data analysis and writing up, but without anyone in mind ahead of the interview. To this extent, the writing of the book has been a parallel process with qualitative research. We did not pre-empt the content areas included in these chapters. Rather, we sorted through the data (the interview transcripts) to see who had had interesting things to say on these topics—and we had plenty to choose from!

It will be obvious to any reader that we have edited the transcripts. We selected excerpts from what were very long interviews, some as long as three hours, and none less than an hour and a half. We also made the choices about where to place the excerpts. Some clearly could have fitted equally well into more than one chapter. This reflects the messiness of research! The text is also more polished than the transcripts. We have deleted repetitions and digressions and generally edited the interview text to make it flow more smoothly as written text. We struggled with this and tried to strike a balance between remaining as true as possible to the actual spoken word while maximising readability. Above all we wanted to get the message across about what the researchers were saying, and 'smoothing out' the text was important to this. We sent all of the excerpts to the researchers for comment before their final inclusion in the book, and we have made the corrections they requested. Where the researchers asked us to do more to tidy up the expression and grammar, we took this as validation of and support for the editing decisions we had made and, in some cases, permission to do more.

We know many other researchers whose work could have had a place in this book. In the end we decided to limit the overall numbers and to use multiple excerpts from the interviews. We had the data we needed and it seemed important to use what we could and not collect more that we would be unable to use. We also liked the continuity and coherence afforded by following the researchers

and their studies through different stages of the research process and hope this helps the reader to become familiar with their work and to follow the threads through the book.

We thank each of the researchers we interviewed—for the readiness with which they agreed to participate in the project, and for their willingness to share their inside stories, given the many unknowns associated with where they would end up. Our thanks also go to Ann Tierney and David Tregaskis for transcribing the interviews, and to Lesley Chenoweth for her helpful comments on Chapter 5.

As writing the book came to a close, we were struck by how our own experiences and those we had drawn from our fellow researchers were becoming synthesised into a collective 'practice wisdom'. We hope that others, including those who may be inspired by reading this book, will add their own experiences of research to what we have produced. In this way, new issues and debates will arise which may challenge what we have said and so extend the emerging body of knowledge on qualitative research in the human services.

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From practice to research

> In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or the larger society while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern (Schon, 1983, pp. 42–3).

The swampy lowland of practice in the human services is a place where there are rarely control groups, where operationalising key constructs in behavioural terms is highly problematic (Is happiness the frequency of smiling behaviour?), where the politics of the setting are often overwhelming and where values and ethical issues are critical and complex. This book has more to do with the swampy lowland than the high hard ground. However, there is a lot of territory in the human services field which connects these two parts of the landscape and we believe that researchers in the human services should be creating terraces which link the two parts of the terrain, not creating territorial disputes.

The belief that 'science makes knowledge, practice uses it' has been claimed to be one of the assumptions of positivism (Rein & White, 1981, p. 36), yet 'scientific' methods of investigation have great difficulty coping with the dynamic and complex social world of the human services. Qualitative research has an important role to

play in understanding this world and in complementing other forms of knowledge.

Qualitative research methods have descended from several disciplines and belong to twenty or more diverse traditions (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). Despite such diversity the core qualitative methods can be described as follows:

- In-depth interviewing of individuals and small groups.
- Systematic observation of behaviour.
- Analysis of documentary data.

In this book we will focus on the first two methods. The techniques we will explore in relation to the analysis of transcripts of interviews or observational field notes are also applicable to pre-existing documentary data.

Qualitative research is not new. Historians have always analysed documentary evidence, much of it non-quantitative data such as correspondence, as their primary source material, and through oral history methods have added in-depth interviewing to their repertoire in recent decades. Anthropology, from its conception as a discipline in the mid-nineteenth century, used qualitative methods such as field observation and informant interviewing to understand cultural patterns and social relationships. Sociology has always drawn upon both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as in the influential Chicago school of urban research in the 1920s, and has often utilised both approaches. Organisational theory has been based largely on case studies created from an amalgam of observation, documentary material and interviews.

In recent years specialisations such as medical anthropology and medical sociology have relied heavily on qualitative methods to explore issues relating to health and illness, from the micro-context of the hospital ward or clinic through to the broader sociocultural context. Qualitative methods have extended well beyond the boundaries of the social sciences in academia. Market research was originally based on the social survey but now complements this with focus groups to tap the processes and nuances of consumer opinion, as does research on public opinion and voting intentions.

Qualitative research in the human services

For well over a decade there has also been a growing interest in qualitative research by academics within nursing, education and

social work as they attempt to struggle with the issues which arise in their particular part of the swampy lowlands. Research methods such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation are particularly well suited to exploring questions in the human services which relate to the meaning of experiences and to deciphering the complexity of human behaviour.

Understanding the significance of past or current experiences lends itself to methods such as in-depth interviewing in which trust and rapport are essential if an individual is to share thoughts and feelings. Some questions lend themselves to systematic observation in order to identify the dynamics which may be operating in a particular group or organisation, or the interaction of different social groups within a community.

This book draws upon a range of qualitative studies in the human services to illustrate how researchers develop their research question, work their way through a minefield of ethical and political obstacles, systematically collect appropriate data, analyse it with rigour and then disseminate the findings and implications of the research.

The interviews we have conducted with qualitative researchers for this book have been taped and transcribed and excerpts from a few of these studies are used in each chapter in order to highlight aspects of that chapter's theme. In many ways this is itself a parallel process to qualitative research. In some chapters, including this one, we also draw upon our own qualitative studies—when we do so, we speak to the reader in the first person in order to highlight that the authorial voice is always present in qualitative research.

In this chapter we explore how the questions which arise from practice in the human services can be addressed by both quantitative and qualitative approaches and sometimes by both at the same time. We then draw upon several qualitative studies to examine how research questions can emerge from different contexts and address very different questions.

Our examples cover diverse fields and units of attention and include women who were sexually abused in childhood; parents with an intellectual disability; maternal and child health nurses' assessment of post-natal depression; a community of homeless people under siege in an inner city area; and a large service system consisting of a large number of organisations.

While most of the researchers were not working as practitioners at the time of the inception of their studies, nearly all of them bring