

## Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography

*Edited by Iain Hay. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000. pp 222. ISBN 0-19-550787-8*

I eagerly awaited the arrival of this book and on the whole was not disappointed. In his short preface, Iain Hay outlines its purpose as locating qualitative research methods in disciplinary and social contexts, with particular emphasis on examples from social/cultural geography in the Asia Pacific Region (pages xxii-xxiii). The book is aimed primarily at second and third year students in Australian and New Zealand universities, but claims also to be useful to those starting post-graduate studies. Hay suggests that the text is "unique in dedication to the provision of practical, 'how to' guidance on methods of qualitative research in geography to novice researchers" (pages xxii-xxiii). It also hopes to provide university academics with a teaching-and-learning framework around which additional materials and exercises on research methods can be developed (page xxii).

The book is indeed a valuable resource for a range of audiences and brings together nine interesting chapters by Australian and New Zealand geographers. These focus on standard qualitative methods such as interviewing (Dunn) and participant observation (Kearns), as well as methods more recently adopted by some geographers such as focus groups (Cameron) and textual analysis (Forbes). Importantly, there is an overview of the place of qualitative research within geography (Winchester) and a specific chapter about the issues and politics associated with research ethics (Dowling). The remaining chapters cover research design and rigour (Bradshaw and Stratford), the use of computers in qualitative research (Peace), and writing about qualitative research (Berg and Mansvelt). At the end, there is a helpful glossary of key terms from the chapters, an extensive bibliography and useful index.

The chapters are laid out to enable easy access to information by students and teachers alike. Each chapter opens with an outline of contents, followed by a short overview of aims. Throughout most chapters there are boxes of helpful case studies drawn from the work of the authors or their graduate students. There

are also many useful diagrams or figures conveying the relationships between different aspects of the research process, methodological implementations or various ideas. Each chapter has a succinct conclusion or summary followed by a list of key terms used. These terms have been highlighted in bold throughout the text and found in the glossary. Each chapter also has a list of review questions that can help consolidate student learning, or enable academics to plan teaching exercises around the chapter's topic. Finally, the authors provide lists of suggested further reading.

As in most edited collections, the orientation and accessibility of the information is variable. While the chapters are generally well written and organised, some more clearly meet the aim of "practical, 'how to' guidance". Others seem more like journal articles concerned with advancing the argument of the author(s). From my reading, the chapters by Dowling, Bradshaw and Stratford, Dunn, Cameron and Peace will be lapped up by second and third year undergraduate students as they contain clear, helpful and practical descriptions and evaluations of their topics. Dowling's approach to tackling ethical issues is particularly pleasing as she steers away from prescriptive advice to a focus which encourages active engagement by students with the processes of critical reflexivity.

Other chapters by Winchester, Forbes, Kearns, and Berg and Mansvelt may suit a more senior undergraduate or honours audience. They are less 'how to' in focus, instead providing a survey of their topic (Winchester and Forbes) or arguments about practice (Kearns, and Berg and Mansvelt) involving epistemology, philosophy and the construction of geographic knowledge. These chapters tend to be written in a less personally-engaging style, adopting the first or third person rather than the second person used in some of the other chapters. However, they provide important perspectives, which could be usefully debated in a class exercise.

To improve the book's coherence and pedagogic value, there should have been greater editorial involvement in the organisation and distribution of the content in the chapters by Winchester, Forbes and Berg and Mansvelt. These cover important material concerning the connections between epistemology and methodology and their implications for doing a different kind of geographic research, yet some chapters contain

material that would have worked better in others. For example, Berg and Mansvelt provide an excellent discussion of the impact of poststructuralism on understandings of knowledge, language, objectivity and therefore the practice of academic research and writing, which needed to have come before, or in, Forbes' chapter on textual analysis where poststructuralism is not (surprisingly) mentioned. In addition, Winchester's overview of the links between method and theory in qualitative geographic research is not detailed or rigorous enough in its attention to the epistemological influences of feminism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism over the last 30 years for the subsequent chapters to be adequately contextualised by students.

I have three criticisms about the book's content. These stem from my position (and therefore my subsequent reading) as a feminist geographer who has spent the last ten years involved in qualitative research using participatory methods with place-based communities in Indonesia and in New Zealand. Firstly, I am troubled by the transformation made between observational or participant observational methods and participatory methods. This is misleading and unhelpful. In chapter one, Hilary Winchester identifies the three main types of qualitative research as oral, textual and observational (page 7). However, later in the chapter she shifts to calling these types, oral, textual and 'participatory' (page 10 and page 20). The slippage may not appear that problematic to many given that, as Robin Kearns notes, almost all observation involves some participation on the part of the researcher (page 110). Yet, there is a huge difference between the participation of a researcher in the life of a community through living with and observing research subjects, and the practice of participatory methods which seek to foster group analysis, build local capacity and enable empowerment for change with active research subjects.

Secondly, I am therefore disappointed by the absence of a chapter on participatory methods or any discussion about the relationship between participatory research, action research and qualitative research in geography. While the inclusion of Jenny Cameron's chapter on the use of focus groups is encouraging, the emphasis of the book still rests on a clear binary distinction between academic researcher and research subjects, and the extraction of information from research subject to

academic researcher. There is no discussion of how research may be formulated in partnership with research subjects to have a specific action orientation, and to involve non-word based activities such as community mapping, diagramming, role-plays, video, and other visual techniques to enable collective synthesis, analysis and planning (Kindon, 1995, 1998 and 2000). With the rising acceptance of participatory approaches around the world and their contributions to collaborative problem solving and the effective utilisation of research (see Narayan, 1996), students would have benefited from thinking about this different orientation to their research.

Thirdly, despite the editor's aim for the book to have a regional focus, there is little discussion about the specific issues associated with doing qualitative research in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, unlike other recent methodology books by Tolich and Davidson (1999) and Davidson and Tolich (1999). Both countries have indigenous populations and increasing cultural diversity. Both countries have researchers engaged in cross-cultural research with indigenous peoples. Yet, there was no chapter (and only a few sparse examples) associated with research with Maori or Aboriginal peoples, issues of cultural safety or cross-cultural research more generally. This absence was disappointing given the importance of postcolonial critiques within geography and the opportunity to clearly link theory and method within the unique geographic locations that are Australia and New Zealand.

So, at the end of the book, I did find myself a little disappointed and I was surprised that there were no pictures or images within the text that showed geographers actually doing qualitative research! However, I do think the book is an important and distinct addition to the other geography methods books now on the market (Flowerdew and Martin 1997; Kitchin and Tate, 2000; Robinson, 1998) and that it will be a helpful resource for senior undergraduate students and academics involved in geographic research. I'll be using it with my classes and would recommend it to others.

## References

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