

# Book Review

Carey, M. (2012). *Qualitative research skills for social work: Theory and Practice*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co.

Reviewed by Charles Garvin, Ph.D., ACSW  
University of Michigan

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The author of this book is part of the University of Manchester faculty in the United Kingdom (U.K.). In the bibliography of this book, he indicates his other works of his on qualitative research as well as aspects of social policy, such as the pros and cons of agency social work and the privatization of state social work in England and Canada. The purpose of this book is to inform readers of the aspects of qualitative research in social work. He particularly aims to reach the reader who is a social work student or is relatively unfamiliar with qualitative research. Thus he generally tends to avoid the use of technical terms without fully explaining their meaning.

The chapters are divided into several sections. The first deals with the foundations of qualitative social work in theory, philosophy, and ethics. The second section outlines specific qualitative methods such as those derived from grounded theory, ethnography, life histories, narrative and discourse analysis, participative research, and research using the tools of the Internet. The last section of the book deals with chapters on such topics as data analysis and reporting and disseminating the findings of the research.

Of special importance to the readers of *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* is the amount of attention the author pays to values. An entire chapter is devoted to this topic, and

value issues are discussed in every chapter with reference to the content of the chapter. The general chapter enjoins the reader not to use coercion, deception, privacy invasion, lack of respect, forcing one's values on participants, and subjecting participants to mental or physical stress. Special concerns are raised when the research deals with sensitive topics such as domestic violence or abuse. The author discusses informed consent and how to obtain consent when obtaining data from children or adults with learning disabilities. He also indicates the requirement that the proposed project be reviewed and approved by appropriate ethics committees, although he discusses this in terms of how this is done in the U.K. The succeeding chapters present the specific ethical concerns that arise in each type of qualitative research.

Another strength of the book highly related to the topic of ethics and values is the author's extensive attention to issues of social justice, empowerment, and oppression. He strongly places qualitative research in the forefront of approaches that are committed to these issues. Thus he fully outlines the implications of critical theory, feminist theories, and postmodernism.

Carey has also done a very extensive literature search with regard to every topic, and the reader can easily access sources of additional

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information. He presents an excellent compilation of websites, although these are somewhat restricted to those developed in the U.K.

The book, as stated above, specifically addresses the student who may be engaged in research for a classroom assignment or a dissertation that includes or precedes the one used to obtain a doctorate. This leads to many injunctions that the more experienced researcher will take for granted, such as making sure that equipment is working, interview space is available, that the researcher uses tact and simple language, and that instruments are pretested.

Carey also stresses at every point that the context related to the project should be taken into consideration, such as relevant history and the influences of setting, culture, policy, and sources of oppression. He describes throughout the book how this may be accomplished with reference to each type of qualitative research.

Of some concern to me are the ways the author uses some terms, although in the spirit of his concern for cultural biases and stereotypes I acknowledge that some usages may differ between the U.S. and the U.K. One concern is his use of such terms as “theory” and “methodology.” He refers to “broad groups of theory” as “realist” and “constructivist,” although he also refers to these as “cultures of research.” I would place these more as issues of phenomenology than as theories in themselves. He also refers to feminist theory; there are many schools of thought in feminist thinking that differ in many ways from one to the other. He also uses terms such as methodology when referring to what I view as sources of data such as individual or group interviews or written documents. He sees literature review as a form of research as well as a first step to undertaking research. This is appropriately addressed later in the book when he presents a qualitative approach to analyzing texts.

A final concern I have, and this may be “nit-picking,” is his grammar, although I again wonder if my views are culture-bound.

Throughout the book on almost every page can be found the plural/singular disparities between subjects and verbs, phrases inserted awkwardly into sentences, and such like. This slowed my reading of this book.

In summation, this book presents a wealth of information on qualitative research. It should be useful as a text for beginning classes on this subject as well as for the new researcher. I reiterate its strengths with respect to value issues, social justice, and attention to the contexts of research.