Book Review: Qualitative Methods for Practice Research
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What is This?
Book Review

It was a delight to read this book on the topic of qualitative research to address practice research issues. I am a research nurse scientist working in an acute care hospital practice setting and I have used qualitative research to focus on several practice issues over the years. Qualitative research has assisted me and my colleagues to more clearly understand nurses’ barriers to practice change initiatives; explore and understand health care providers’ practices associated with the prevention of pressure ulcers and catheter-associated urinary tract infections; and to understand patients’, families’, and health care providers’ views on visitation during intensive care unit hospitalization. Qualitative research is frequently misunderstood in the clinical practice arena; thus, resources such as this book are essential in the quest to bring in qualitative research to dynamic clinical practice settings to better serve patients and families.

The purpose of this book is to encourage social workers and mental health and other health care professionals to embrace engaged scholarship in the coproduction of knowledge in open systems to reduce the gap between research and practice using qualitative methods. The text provides essential information for clinicians to engage in qualitative research to enhance practice knowledge, addressing what the authors call the phenomenological practice gap. Although the book is written primarily with social workers and mental health providers in mind, it could easily be used by other health care professionals interested in learning more about qualitative research methods in practice.

The authors structure the book so that the reader builds an understanding of how qualitative methods can enhance practice. More notably, they provide realistic examples of how to design, obtain, and analyze data, and apply findings from a qualitative study to improve practice engagement and knowledge. The book’s introduction provides a compelling clinical example of how open system research can coproduce knowledge between participants and clinicians. The clinical example used in the introduction is referred to throughout the book; thus, reading the introduction is an essential step in using the text well. A brief overview of the essential content covered in each of the following five chapters is outlined in the introduction, with a constant focus back to the need for engaged scholarship to coproduce knowledge between patients and providers, thereby deepening our understanding of complex human phenomena.

The first chapter provides an overview of critical realism as a way to think about open systems and apply qualitative methods to coproduce knowledge. The authors spend a significant amount of time in this chapter discussing and contrasting open and closed practice systems. Concepts related to empirical domains relying on facts and data and realism. It is in this chapter that the phenomenological practice gap tensions between theory and practice are explored, and use of qualitative methods to close the gap is introduced to the reader. The concepts of brute and institutional facts are presented with respect to how social work researchers confront the world based on facts and values within the dynamic relationships of individuals, families, organizations, and communities. The chapter provides practice insight into the importance of deploying qualitative methods to more clearly actualize the role of theory in practice in a meaningful way.

Chapter two is exceedingly helpful, describing how research questions and aims are formulated, participants are recruited, and data are collected and analyzed. The authors provide a brief but detailed introduction on how to use computer software (e.g., ATLAS.ti) for data management and analysis. Multiple helpful screen shots are provided to explain how to successfully use technology in the analysis of qualitative data. This chapter concludes with a case illustration in which the authors integrate clinical realism and engaged scholarship using qualitative methods to address a practice phenomenon of youth experiences with psychotropic medications. The clinical example solidifies the content presented in the chapter for the reader, and reinforces the benefits of engaging in...
qualitative research methods to enhance practice knowledge and understanding.

The next two chapters focus on ethnography—more specifically institutional ethnography—as an example for understanding theory–practice gaps and how these gaps can be overcome through engagement of qualitative methods in open systems. Again, the authors use examples from their practice to explain to the reader how institutional ethnography can enhance practice outcomes related to mental health. Chapter four discusses how engaged scholarship informs evidence-based intervention implementation.

In the fifth and final chapter, the authors discuss reflexive practice (praxis). An argument is made for engaged research to include seven tenets of autonomous reflexivity; each of the elements are discussed and related back to engaged scholarship to bridge the phenomenological practice gap. The authors provide an eloquent summary of the book in this chapter, restating their position that research detached from practice is disconnected from what is real and can be experienced. Thus, the need to conduct research in open systems that is informed by qualitative methods and includes social workers, researchers, and clients to reflexively coproduce knowledge is the essence of engaged scholarship.

The book is written for beginning and experienced practitioners; however, it could be used with graduate students who have a foundational understanding of principles of qualitative research. I would not consider this a text to introduce clinicians to qualitative research, but rather a text to expound on current knowledge a clinician has with qualitative methods. The authors provide numerous, clinically realistic examples for how to use qualitative research methods to reduce gaps in practice between theory and clinical realities. The primary weakness in the book is the assumption that the reader has a solid understanding of critical realism and open systems research. Strengths lie in the authors’ detailed, yet brief review of concepts essential to understanding critical realism and open systems as a foundation for embracing qualitative research in practice to coproduce knowledge. Multiple additional resources are provided in text boxes throughout specific chapters. The glossary and notes sections at the end of the book provide depth for better understanding by a more novice reader. The book is useful for clinicians seeking to learn more about the role of qualitative methods for practice research by researchers and clinicians.