

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

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# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

MONIQUE HENNINK • INGE HUTTER • AJAY BAILEY

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Qualitative research humanizes science



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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The first edition of this book was initiated jointly by **Inge Hutter** and **Monique Hennink**, who developed training workshops in qualitative research methods for academic researchers and graduate students. These training courses were conducted during the late 1990s until 2002 in many developed and developing countries including China, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Kosovo, France, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and USA. **Ajay Bailey** later joined as an instructor on some of these workshops. These workshops and our extensive experience in applying qualitative research in diverse research settings provide the backdrop for the content of the first and second editions of this book.

**Monique Hennink\*** is an Associate Professor in the Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in the USA. She is trained in demography and conducts qualitative and mixed methods research in globally diverse settings. Her research focuses on understanding socio-cultural and behavioural aspects of public health issues, particularly sexual and reproductive health, often to develop effective health interventions. She teaches graduate-level courses on qualitative research and mentors Doctoral and Master's-level research students in Public Health, Behavioural Sciences, Nursing, Sociology, Epidemiology and Medical Sciences. She also developed the *QUAL-WORKS* program to train public health professionals in qualitative research. Throughout her teaching and mentoring of qualitative research, she encourages balancing methodological rigour with the practical realities of global field research. She has authored other textbooks on *International Focus Group Research* (2007) with Cambridge University Press and *Focus Group Discussions* (2014) with Oxford University Press. She has also published

articles on qualitative methodology, including research experiments on saturation and sample size for qualitative studies; the quality of transcription via court reporters; and using interpreters and translators in qualitative research.

**Inge Hutter\*** is a Professor of Participatory and Qualitative Research in Population and Development at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. She is trained as a non-western demographer and a cultural anthropologist and conducted extensive fieldwork in India and Cameroon. She has been involved in many qualitative PhD research and research-for action projects in the Netherlands, USA, Asia and Africa. Her own research focuses on culture and (reproductive) health and the application of qualitative research within the quantitative discipline of demography. Listening to people, hearing their voices and situating them in the cultural context in which they live, is the central theme of her research work. She wants her research to lead to not only academic knowledge but also to contribute to actions and interventions, in partnership with other societal stakeholders such as policy makers and non-governmental organizations. In this light, a participatory approach to qualitative research was co-developed. Several joint research projects in India, Kosovo, Malawi, Ghana and the Netherlands demonstrate this participatory approach to qualitative research. Thus, she believes not only that qualitative research humanizes science, but that qualitative research can also contribute to improving the well-being of people and enhancing social change in society.

(\*Both authors contributed equally to this book)

**Ajay Bailey** is an Associate Professor of Transnational Mobilities at the Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He leads the research line Global Migration, Culture and Place working at the interface of anthropology, geography, demography and public health. He holds the prestigious Dr T.M.A. Pai Endowed Chair in Qualitative Methods at Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India, named after Dr Tonse Madhav Ananth, the founder of the university. With his Chair, he coordinates the Transdisciplinary Center for Qualitative Methods – a joint initiative with Manipal Academy of Higher Education. To develop this research line he has been awarded more than €1.5 million in grant funding by a number of organizations such as NWO/Dutch Organization for Scientific Research, Ubbo Emmius Foundation, Gratama Foundation, amongst others. As an anthropologist and a cultural demographer, he has produced more than 30 top peer-reviewed international publications; one highly cited monograph; and has supervised nine PhD researchers. He is passionate about qualitative research, teaching, and capacity building of young researchers. His work significantly contributes to expanding the field of transnational mobilities, ageing, inter-generational relations, health systems research, health services, reducing barriers to care, while establishing meaningful North–South and South–South collaborations.

## About the contributor

**Christine Fenenga** contributed to Chapters 4 and 12 on the participatory approach to qualitative research. She is a post-doctoral researcher in Public Health and Social Anthropology and works with the Applied Health Research Department of the University Medical Centre Groningen in the

Netherlands and the Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy in the US. Originally trained as a physiotherapist, she pursued her career in international health, living and working in over 15 countries in Africa and Asia. Through her experience as healthcare coordinator in different countries with different cultures, she developed interest in socio-cultural beliefs and practices in health. She thus continued studying. She holds a Master's degree in Community Health from the University of Liverpool, and Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam, and conducted her PhD research in Ghana, studying clients' perspectives on healthcare and health insurance. She remains involved in various studies, mainly qualitative studies in Africa, Asia and Europe. She strongly believes that real change can only happen when people themselves are part of the process. Listening to their voices in their own community, understanding their beliefs and perceptions are key. The strength of qualitative research, in particular when using a participatory approach, lies in the contribution people themselves make in each stage of the research. This not only contributes to scientific knowledge but can also lead to social change and improved well-being.



# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Ten years have passed since the first edition of this book was published. The enthusiasm of students, teachers and researchers who have used the book has exceeded our expectations. We were pleased to learn that our book has been widely cited across very diverse disciplines worldwide. It is very encouraging for us that our book is a useful resource and is relevant across a wide range of academic disciplines and in many different countries. This is exactly what we intended when we developed the book.

Over the years, we used the textbook as the foundation for our own courses and workshops on qualitative research, as a resource for mentoring graduate research students, and while conducting our own research projects. During these activities we also received much feedback on our approach from other researchers, questions from our students and workshop participants, and we refined our own understanding of qualitative research from both teaching and applying the techniques we described in the book. Inge Hutter even uses knowledge from the emic and etic perspectives in her management role at a research institute. The feedback we received over the years provided a useful starting point to reflect and improve the content of our book for a second edition.

When Sage asked us to consider writing a second edition of our book, we readily agreed, since qualitative research is our passion. However, writing this second edition was a long journey. We experienced many changes in our personal and professional lives: significant personal losses, family illness and changing professional appointments with increasing demands on our time. Despite many delays, we were determined to complete this second edition and continue to encourage the rigorous application of qualitative research methods.

In this second edition, our *Qualitative Research Cycle* (QRC) remains the central focus of the book from which we describe the cyclical processes of qualitative research. However, we have refined the QRC from our own reflection and application of it and from feedback of others. We refined the names of the cycles and tasks within them to better reflect what we do in qualitative research.

We also strengthened the description of inductive and deductive reasoning, which is a key characteristic of our approach to qualitative research and the QRC, by describing how to integrate both aspects throughout the different stages of a qualitative study. The chapters now include a description of inductive and deductive approaches.

We have also enhanced the content on evaluating quality, by adding a new Postscript chapter on assessing quality in the QRC. The Postscript describes the core attributes of quality in our qualitative research approach: the importance of coherence, the iterative processes of inductive and deductive reasoning, and reflexivity. The Postscript complements the quality assessment criteria which we include at the end of each chapter.

In the chapters on data collection, we added the range of skills needed for effective interviewing, group moderation and observing when using the different methods of data collection. In the chapters on data analysis, we added a summary of different approaches to qualitative data analysis and how the analytic tasks we describe can apply across different analytic approaches. We also expanded our discussion on using computer programs in qualitative data analysis.

We have restructured and expanded the chapter on writing qualitative research to focus on writing different sections of an academic journal article or thesis, as reviewers stressed this as an area where novice qualitative researchers need more guidance. This chapter also includes a new section on responding to common critiques of qualitative research (e.g. criticisms of 'small' sample sizes, lack of generalizability, subjectivity, and using an iterative process), which are often received from journal reviewers or peers at academic conferences.

In addition, the content of all chapters has been generally revised and updated. We have also included a glossary of terms used throughout the book, since we assume that most readers will not read the book cover to cover, and may have missed the first time a term or concept was introduced and defined, so they can now easily find these definitions in the glossary. The second edition also has a website of online resources that can be used to enhance teaching qualitative research. The website includes PowerPoint slides from each chapter with key points, figures and further resources.

The second edition includes two new chapters on participatory qualitative research (Chapters 4 and 12). These chapters are based on the work of Inge Hutter and colleagues from the Population Research Centre at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, who conducted participatory qualitative research in India, Kosovo, Malawi, Uganda, Ghana and the Netherlands, which contributed to the development and maturing of their participatory approach to qualitative research over time. These two chapters were written in collaboration with Christine Fenenga.

Chapter 4 describes how to *design* participatory qualitative research where the researcher aims not only at academic outcomes but also at social change outcomes, and where collaboration with other societal stakeholders is essential. Chapter 12 describes the process of using qualitative research findings, representing the voices of research participants, to co-design and co-implement social action or community interventions for social change. Qualitative research then has an important role in reflecting the emic perspective in community interventions and ensuring sustainable social change.

Both these new chapters describe additional components to the QRC to make qualitative research more participatory and integrating rigorous academic research with principles of

participatory action for social change. We believe that these new chapters are important because researchers are becoming increasingly evaluated on the social relevance and impact of their academic research.

We hope the second edition of our book continues to support new qualitative researchers to learn the art and science of this approach and to inspire more experienced qualitative researchers with new ideas on how to conduct, teach and evaluate qualitative research. We look forward to your feedback on our second edition.

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# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In the academic world there is an increasing demand for qualitative research. We notice that even within disciplines that traditionally use quantitative research, the application of mixed methods research is becoming increasingly common. This has spurred a renewed interest in qualitative research methods across many academic disciplines and a greater interest in training for qualitative research. In addition, policy and intervention research is increasingly interested in identifying the perspectives of the people and also embrace qualitative research. With this book we hope to contribute to this growing interest in qualitative research and training. Our book is aimed at researchers from many scientific disciplines who wish to learn the process of qualitative research, whether at a beginning or more advanced level.

This book is based on a ten year collaboration between Monique Hennink and Inge Hutter, who met at a research workshop in the United Kingdom. In 10 minutes we decided that there was a need for improved training in qualitative research and began to develop the initial training workshop which was first held in the Netherlands. This collaboration has continued for the past decade focusing on improving training for qualitative research through a number of joint activities. We developed and conducted training workshops on qualitative research methods in many developed and developing countries, including China, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Kosovo, France, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and USA. More recently Ajay Bailey became involved in organizing the training workshops. These workshops provide the foundation and inspiration for this book.

Our workshop participants provided us with a stimulating environment in which to share and discuss the qualitative research approach. Workshop participants were from:

- *Diverse academic disciplines:* both from quantitatively oriented disciplines (i.e. demography, statistics, public health, economics, psychology, sociology) as well as disciplines that are more oriented to qualitative methods (i.e. cultural anthropology, nursing, cultural geography, spatial planning, marketing, pedagogical sciences).
- *Different cultural backgrounds:* Europe (Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Romania, France, Poland, Kosovo, Czech Republic, Greece, Estonia, Turkey), Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Indonesia), Africa (Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia) and the USA.
- *Various academic levels:* Master's and PhD level researchers, senior researchers from academic and independent research organizations, development organizations and policy makers.

We wrote this book to contribute to training in qualitative research more generally, but we feel that the book has several features that make a unique contribution to qualitative research training. We conceptualize the process of qualitative research in our *Qualitative Research Cycle* that is used to structure the book. This provides a structure for learning the cyclical nature of qualitative research that can seem unclear at first. We also reflect the use of qualitative research in diverse international settings and demonstrate the flexibility of the approach and techniques. We believe that our approach to qualitative research described in this book is equally valuable for researchers working in Zambia, Kathmandu, Italy or New York, and therefore has a global appeal. We also provide many practical strategies, tools and empirical examples throughout this book that we hope provides a 'real world' focus to learning qualitative research.

We hope that our book will inspire readers to develop their qualitative research skills, to identify the 'voices' of the people they study, and contribute to the humanizing of science through qualitative research. We also invite your feedback on our book and our approach.

**Monique Hennink**

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**Inge Hutter**

University of Groningen,  
the Netherlands

**Ajay Bailey**

University of Groningen,  
the Netherlands

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first edition of this book was based on our own experience of qualitative research and a decade of teaching workshops on qualitative research conducted in Europe, Asia and Africa. We again thank the many workshop participants from years past for providing us with stimulating discussions about qualitative research that helped us to develop and improve our approach to qualitative research that formed the first edition of our book. The training workshops that we conducted would not have been possible without the support of the many research institutes in the countries where we provided training. We thank these research institutes for the invitation to contribute to training courses. We would also like to thank the various funders and agencies who made those workshops possible.

We continue to thank our own students who provide us with valuable opportunities to share and learn more about the qualitative approach and have asked questions and spurred discussion that led to improvements in this second edition. We are grateful to the students and graduate researchers who again agreed to include their case studies of experiences in conducting qualitative research in the second edition of the book. Thank you for sharing your work with us (in alphabetical order): Sujatha Annishettar, Alicia Antayhua, Vlora Basha, Julia Battle, Hans Caljé, Candice Dias, Christine Fenenga, Jonathan Grund, Karen Haandrikman, Eveline Hage, Loes Kendle, Mirjam Klaassens, Anu Kõu, Louise Meijering, Jannie Nijlunsing, Wolter Paans, Rubina Shiotani, Mary Sibande, and Mary Beth Weber.

We also thank our own institutes, Emory University in the USA, the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, of Erasmus University Rotterdam, and Utrecht University for supporting us while writing this book. Finally, we also thank SAGE for inviting us to write a second edition of this book and for their patience during times when our progress was stalled. We also thank many anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback and suggestions that helped us refine and update the chapters of this second edition.



# ONLINE RESOURCES



Covering every stage of your research project from design to dissemination, this book's online resources offer the support you need to use and understand qualitative research methods. Find them at: <https://study.sagepub.com/hennink2e>.

**Case studies** exemplify how qualitative research works in the real world.

**Real world datasets** enable you to practise and master data analysis at your own pace.

**Exercises** from the book allow you to develop specific research skills like writing a research question and conducting an interview.

**Annotated further reading** signpost key journal articles that help you develop a deeper understanding of qualitative research in practice.

**Glossary flashcards** help you gain confidence in applying and using methods terminology.

Lecturers can access:

**PowerPoint templates** featuring figures and tables from the book, which can be customized for use in your own presentations.

# INTRODUCTION

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# 1

## Introduction to the Book

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## Objectives

After reading this chapter you will:

- know who this book is for;
- become familiar with our qualitative research cycle;
- become familiar with the features of this book;
- know the structure of this book.

## Who is this book for?

This book is useful for researchers and students from different academic disciplines who want to learn the process of conducting qualitative research. The book is suitable for both novice and more advanced qualitative researchers. For those new to qualitative research we recommend starting with Chapter 2, which describes the nature of qualitative research and the underlying principles for data collection that are described in Chapters 7–9. Researchers who are more familiar with methods of qualitative data collection may be interested in qualitative data analysis, developing inductive theories or writing qualitative research in Part III. For researchers interested in developing participatory qualitative research projects, i.e. aiming at academic *and* social change outcomes by involving participants and other societal **stakeholders**, Chapters 4 and 12 are most relevant. This book is also relevant for those who evaluate the quality of qualitative research projects to understand how to assess qualitative study design, data collection and analysis. We provide criteria to assess the quality of your qualitative research at the end of each chapter and in the Postscript.

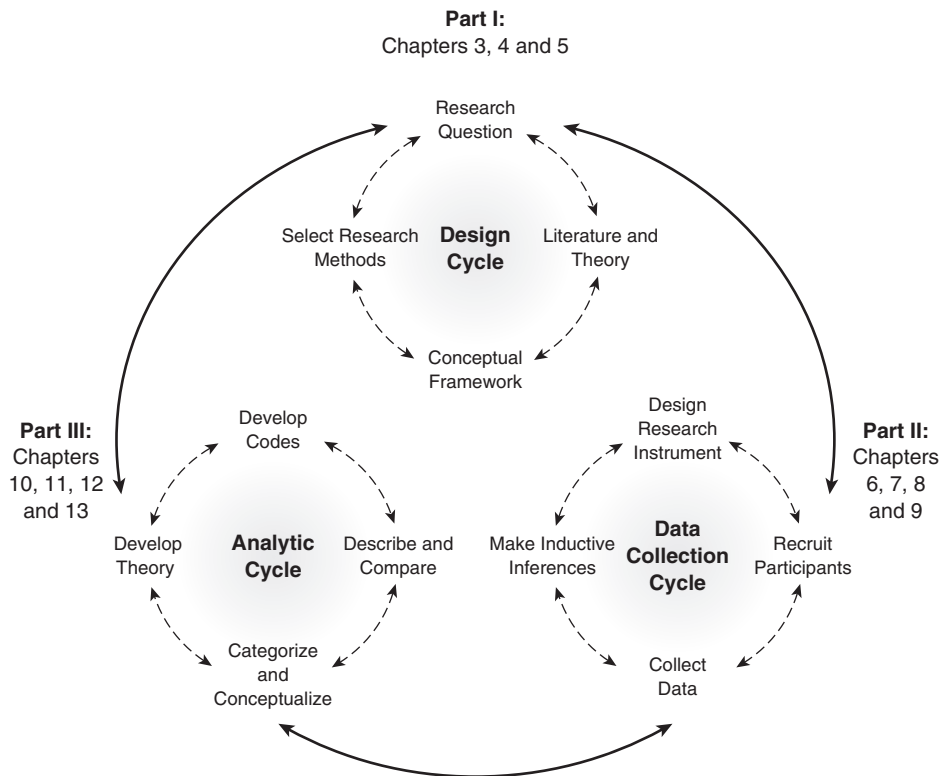
## The qualitative research cycle

In this book we present a framework for conducting qualitative research that acknowledges the cyclical nature of the qualitative research process. We call it the **qualitative research cycle**, and it is shown in Figure 1.1. Our approach is shaped by conducting qualitative research within the predominantly positivist and quantitative disciplines in which we work (e.g. demography and health sciences). Therefore, we discern that qualitative research involves an explicit study design process (the design cycle); and while the inductive nature of qualitative research is well known, we also recognize that induction continuously alternates with deductive reasoning. Throughout the book we describe how to use inductive and deductive reasoning in designing qualitative research (**design cycle**), in collecting qualitative data (**data collection cycle**) and in analysing these data (**analytic cycle**). Our approach is described in further detail in Chapter 2.

Our qualitative research cycle thus consists of three interlinked cycles: the *design cycle*, the *data collection cycle* and the *analytic cycle*, each of which is briefly described below.

## The design cycle

The design cycle is the first component of the qualitative research cycle. It consists of four interlinked tasks: the formulation of research questions and objectives; reviewing research literature and incorporating **theory**; developing a conceptual framework for the study; and selecting methods of data collection. These four tasks form the conceptual design phase of a research project. As you



**Figure 1.1** Hutter–Hennink qualitative research cycle

conduct each task and move around the cycle, you also return to earlier tasks and adjust these so there is coherence between all components in the design cycle. The design cycle leads to the data collection cycle and guides your initial data collection. However, you also return to the design cycle to refine the research question or conceptual framework of the study based on data collected. If you want to conduct a participatory qualitative research project you additionally follow a **participatory design sub-cycle** as described in Chapter 4. The design cycle is described in Part I of this book.

## The data collection cycle

The data collection cycle is the second component of the qualitative research cycle. It is closely linked to the design cycle, to ensure a logical flow from the conceptual design of the study to its field application. The data collection cycle comprises the core tasks in qualitative data collection, including designing the research instrument, recruiting participants and collecting data. These three tasks are guided by the study design that was developed in the design cycle. The fourth task involves making inductive inferences, which is the pivotal point that makes data collection into the circular process that characterizes qualitative data collection. Making this inductive turn involves using what you learn in early data collection to guide subsequent data collection to go deeper into the research issues thereby generating richer or ‘thicker’ data as you proceed. The inductive turn may also lead to adjustments in the data collection tasks, for example refining the research instrument, participant recruitment strategies or the method of data collection based on

what you learn in early data collection. The data collection cycle therefore begins with deductive reasoning and continues with an inductive process that refines and reshapes the data collection process. Initiating the inductive process involves reviewing data as you collect it, which incorporates early data analysis into data collection, thereby linking the data collection cycle with the analytic cycle. The data collection cycle is described in Part II of this book.

## The analytic cycle

The analytic cycle is the third component of the qualitative research cycle. It comprises the core tasks of qualitative data analysis, including developing codes, description and comparison, categorizing and conceptualizing data and developing theory. These analytic tasks are closely inter-linked: not only are they conducted in a circular manner whereby tasks are repeated throughout the analytic process, but tasks are also conducted simultaneously and used throughout data analysis. As data analysis proceeds you may also return to data collection to further explore issues or fill gaps in the data, thus linking the analytic and data collection cycles. The analytic cycle also links back to the original design cycle, as data analysis is informed by concepts and theory from the study design. Inductive findings from the analytic cycle are also compared with the original conceptual framework of the study (developed in the design cycle) to discern how the study findings contribute new concepts or explanations to existing theory. The process of qualitative research has now come full circle. If you conduct a participatory qualitative research project, the analysis of your data is followed by validation and dissemination of your findings and the design of social action through the participant-based action cycle (see Chapter 12). The data analysis cycle is described in Part III of this book.

## Structure of the book

The qualitative research cycle provides the structure of this book. We begin by describing the nature of qualitative research and the underlying concepts of the interpretive approach (Chapter 2). The book is then divided into three parts corresponding to the three cycles within the qualitative research cycle.

In Part I, we describe the components of the design cycle. In Chapter 3, we outline the design of qualitative research questions and objectives and describe how to summarize theory, literature and the research question in a conceptual framework. We then discuss the selection of research methods and mixed methods study design. Chapter 4 is a new chapter in this second edition and describes how to integrate a participatory research approach into the qualitative research cycle, from the design stage onwards, to conduct research that aims not only at academic outcomes but also social change outcomes. Chapter 5 discusses ethical issues in qualitative research.

In Part II, we describe the components of the data collection cycle. We describe sampling and participant recruitment in qualitative research in Chapter 6. We then focus on three common methods of data collection: in-depth interviews (Chapter 7), focus group discussions (Chapter 8) and observation (Chapter 9). Each of these methods chapters describes the process from instrument design to data collection, and how the process of making inductive inferences contributes to the circular process to generate rich data.

In Part III, we describe the components of the analytic cycle. Chapter 10 describes data preparation and development of codes. Chapter 11 discusses the core analytic tasks: description, comparison, categorization, conceptualization and theory development. Chapter 12 describes how you can move from analysis to social action and social change outcomes, following the

participatory approach to qualitative research. It describes how to validate your study findings, with participants and stakeholders, and subsequently co-design and co-implement an action or intervention.

Chapter 13 discusses approaches to writing and presenting the findings of qualitative research. We provide strategies for presenting findings in narrative text and diagrams.

In the Postscript, we reflect on how the qualitative research cycle may be used to assess the quality of a qualitative study.

## Features of the book

The following features of the book are included to help you learn the different aspects of qualitative research.

*Theory and practice.* We include a discussion of the theoretical principles as well as the practical application of qualitative research, through case studies, field examples and exercises.

*International field examples.* We provide many examples from our own research in the health and population sciences. Our research reflects the international context of our work and highlights the application of qualitative research in different cultural contexts.

*Interdisciplinary case studies.* We include case study examples from other researchers in a range of disciplines, such as geography, spatial planning, nursing, public health, medical sciences, population studies, cultural anthropology and communication sciences.

*Research tools.* We include many research tools from our own research projects (e.g. interview guides, coded data segments, theoretical frameworks).

*Visual aids.* The chapters on research methods (in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and observation) include photographs of the method in practice to demonstrate specific elements of research practice (e.g. seating of interviewers, interview context, body language).

*Exercises.* Exercises are included at the end of each chapter to help you practise specific skills – for example, writing a qualitative research question; conducting a mock focus group discussion, an interview or an observation; transcribing an interview; developing codes from data; presenting qualitative research findings.

*Methodological and empirical further reading.* Annotated further readings are included in each chapter. We include one list of readings related to the methodological concepts described in the chapter, and a second list of readings for examples of empirical research.

*Evaluating quality.* Each chapter includes a series of questions to assist you in evaluating the quality of your qualitative research – to check that your qualitative research is appropriate, valid, coherent, transparent, interpretive, grounded, saturated, reflexive, culturally sensitive, ethical and provides new information. We also include a postscript to the book on assessing the quality of qualitative research using our qualitative research cycle.

*Key points.* Each chapter concludes with a textbox summarizing the key points.

*Glossary.* We include a glossary to define terms and concepts that we use in the book. Terms that are shown in bold text throughout the book are listed in the glossary.

*Online resources.* This book has an accompanying website of further resources for researchers and instructors.

