

Book reviews

Carter, Y., Shaw, S. and Thomas, C. eds. 1999: *An introduction to qualitative methods for health care professionals*. London: Royal College of General Practitioners. 138 pp. £16.20 (RCGP members), £18.00 (non-members). ISBN: 0 85084 2468.

What a good read! This is exactly the sort of book which every embryonic or novice qualitative researcher should have on their shelves. A slim, easily digested volume, it introduces its readers to the key issues of researching in a qualitative paradigm. It does so by presenting a well-selected compilation of articles, all of which have previously been published elsewhere, but which collectively provide a comprehensive overview of the qualitative research process and its relevance to health care settings. The only criticism to be levelled at the selection is that where book chapters have been reproduced, they are presented wholesale. Although the quality of the authorship is such as to make their inclusion worthwhile, various references to their original sources were somewhat irritating.

Nevertheless, this section of the book provides an excellent springboard for those wishing either to dip their toes or indeed to immerse themselves in the pool of qualitative research methods. Articles 1 to 6 address the question 'What is qualitative research?'. Article 3 offers the highly acclaimed and well-respected theoretical perspectives of Denzin and Lincoln, who consider competing paradigms in social research. Their article offers an informed overview of the philosophical issues relating to qualitative methods, and contextualizes competing paradigms within basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. These concepts – fundamental to the research process – are clearly defined, and the implications of each are set out in such a way as to delineate the differences in each paradigm appli-

cation with regard to the ways in which data are collected, interpreted and reported.

Articles 7 to 13 deal with the issues relating to sampling, data collection and analysis. This section provides the reader with an excellent overview of a range of methods for data collection, including interviews, observation and focus groups. Having considered the design issues relating to qualitative studies in the article by Patton, the section concludes with an article by Bryan and Burgess, which offers an account of the developments in qualitative analysis over the past decade.

The last two articles in the book address the issues of rigour in the qualitative research process. Article 14 (by Mays and Pope) addresses questions of validity and reliability in qualitative studies, while Article 15 (by Hodinott and Pill) highlights the need for transparency and rigour in qualitative research in order to ensure a high-quality research process.

I particularly like the way in which, in the first section of the book, the editors provide the reader with a range of exercises relating to specific aspects of qualitative research. These allow opportunities both for systematic engagement with the text and for reflection on the key issues identified in the selected readings.

Overall, this book provides a solid account of the key issues pertaining to qualitative research. The format is clear, logical and welcoming. As an introductory text, the various accounts and references will serve as a springboard for those interested in further reading. I am sure the book will serve as a confidence booster for those considering launching their qualitative careers. I have long argued that within the health professional context, a qualitative research framework is most apposite. Readers of this book will, I am sure, find themselves informed as to the process and inspired as to the potential inherent in adopting a qualitative paradigm for research into health care.

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Buchanan, A. and Hudson, B. eds. 2000: *Promoting children's emotional well-being: messages from research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 258 pp. £27.50. ISBN: 0 19 263174 8.

This volume is the latest product from the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children, a creative collaboration between the Oxford University departments of Public Health, Educational Studies, Psychiatry and Applied Social Studies. With material covering different aspects of parent education, school-based interventions, legal procedures, diagnosis, the promotion of resilience and epidemiology, the chapters illustrate the advantages of drawing views from a variety of different disciplines. The bias is openly towards quantitative research, leavened by chapters from Adrienne Katz and Roger Grimshaw, where children and parents respectively, appear, in roles other than as experimental subjects. The most satisfying chapters focus on more specific issues. Baillie and colleagues offer a succinct and positive review of programmes aimed at helping parents to improve their children's literacy, Joan Hunt provides a compelling rationale for speeding up the process of making judicial decisions on children's futures, and Capaldi and Eddy provide some of the strongest evidence in the volume of the potentially distal effects of school-based interventions in reducing child antisocial behaviours.

The central subject – the promotion of children's emotional well-being – is one of considerable contemporary magnitude. However, as this volume makes clear, our knowledge of what contributes to children's well-being is far more extensive than our ability to actually bring it about. A speculator in the stock-market of human welfare, who measured their return on investment by gains in the physical, mental and social well-being of children, would have had mixed fortunes over the past half century. Shares in interventions that reduce

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mortality and physical morbidity would have performed strongly. Conversely, children's emotional and psychosocial well-being has been something of a bear market. As Buchanan points out in her introductory chapter, the psychological health of children has been in steady decline for the past half century. This is particularly disappointing as the political environment in which this degradation in children's mental health has taken place has been increasingly responsive to children's apparent needs. Children, by most objective measurements, have been placed more at the heart of our social agenda than at any other time in history. Yet up to a quarter of children may experience diagnosable emotional and behavioural disorders. This tide is unlikely to be reversed, as the contributors to this volume would undoubtedly be the first to admit, purely by health and social welfare interventions, however well constructed and validated they might be. Hints of issues left undeveloped occasionally peek from the text. The devastating impact of parental separation, particularly on working-class boys, merits one paragraph in the entire book, in Capaldi and Eddy's discussion. The role of fathers in parenting is discussed in detail only by Adrienne Katz. (As in most texts on families, the term 'parent' can be translated as 'mother'.) The WHO definition of health ('a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being') is cited by several contributors, all uncritically, when some discussion of how an essentially unattainable health target might have contributed to the substantial increases in self-reported ill health experienced in developed countries may have proved illuminating. Despite a recognition of the need for preventive activities that function in several dimensions, most of the interventions described operate at the level of child, parent or school. However, these are minor caveats, and as much a reflection of the available research as acts of omission. As a review of current best knowledge on school and parent education-based interventions, this is an admirable – and particularly well-referenced – addition to the literature.

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