

# Book Review - *Qualitative Interviewing* (Herbert and Irene Rubin)

*Qualitative Interviewing* is a detailed instruction on how to interview respondents. The authors are experts in the field, with decades of qualitative research experience; Herbert J. Rubin is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Northern Illinois University and Irene S. Rubin is Professor Emeritus of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University.

The first chapter covers how research interviews differ from casual conversations. The Rubins then describe the differing world views that support quantitative and qualitative research. Positivism assumes that reality is objective, can be measured systematically, analyzed mathematically, and can be known by researchers. Constructionists (at least some) accept the existence of reality but deny the possibility of objectively knowing it. Positivism emphasizes quantitative while constructionism emphasizes qualitative research, but the real choice of which to use depends on the question at hand.

The Rubins next discuss data gathering techniques including participant observation, documentary analysis and qualitative interviews. Responsive interviewing, the focus of the book, requires identifying and evaluating a research question, and designing a study to answer the question. Interviewing is more difficult than it seems, and researchers must know how to do it.

The central part of the book describes in great detail how to conduct responsive interviews. Interviews include main questions, follow up questions, and probes for specific information. Using the same examples that they provide in the text, interview questions can cover a broad area, such as the main branches of a tree. Alternatively they can focus on one area and only briefly touch others, such as a river and its channels.

The authors' chapter on interviewing special populations was interesting. In my clinical practice I routinely interview children (many less than four years old), the aged, and the mentally ill. Their recommendations for these populations, as well as those for elites and technical experts, can help the novice interviewer. Medical interviews for the elites and technical experts are easier in some ways because people in these groups seek out medical care and will devote the time necessary to receive it.

The data analysis portion is step by step; a plus for people learning to interview. Recording and transcribing each interview is the first step. Identifying concepts and marking them in the text is next. Third, researchers must sort the material and then integrate it to gain a complete picture. Finally the investigators combine the concepts and themes they have discovered and show how they generalize to other people and situations.

Qualitative Interviewing is a good primer on how to effectively interview respondents in qualitative studies. It is less useful for people who interview others every day, such as physicians, but even they will benefit from studying interview techniques in other contexts.