**Book review title**

ALICIA O’CATHAIN A practical guide to using qualitative research with randomized controlled trials. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-880208-2 (sbk) £34.99.

**Review written by:**

Frances C. Sherratt 1

1 Department of Psychological Sciences, University Of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

**Correspondence:**

Dr Frances C Sherratt

Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Liverpool, Whelan Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool, L69 3GB

E-mail: sherratt@liverpool.ac.uk

Tel: +44151 795 0347

**ALICIA O’CATHAIN A practical guide to using qualitative research with randomized controlled trials. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-880208-2 (sbk) £34.99.**

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are often referred to as the gold standard of health research. Increasingly, qualitative studies are implemented before, during and after trials to develop, guide and evaluate trial design and conduct. Alicia O’Cathain presents “a ‘how-to’ book about the use of qualitative research with randomized controlled trials” (blurb), in which she describes how the book is aimed at two audiences: researchers and students who recognise the complexity of the interventions they are evaluating, the environments in which trials are undertaken, or the participants with whom health interventions are tested, and; those who are suspicious or weary of the addition of a qualitative study to a trial.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) Introducing qualitative research with RCTs: overview of rationales, study designs, and paradigms; (2) Practical guidance for using qualitative research with RCTs; (3) Engaging relevant stakeholders. Part one introduces the topic, provides rationale for qualitative research with trials, describes potential frameworks one might wish to adopt, considers how qualitative research can contribute to generating evidence of effectiveness, provides an overview of different types of RCTs and explains how one’s qualitative study might fit with each – a brief but very useful summary for those new to trial design. The first part of the book, in particular, focuses on intervention development and evaluation, as opposed to qualitative approaches designed to optimise recruitment for example, indicating that the book will be especially valuable for those using qualitative methods to inform intervention design and evaluation. The final chapter of part one focuses on the paradigms one might wish to adopt in applying qualitative methods in this context, such as post-positivism, participatory action research, realism etc., offering succinct and concise descriptions of paradigms.

Part two progresses on from introducing qualitative research with RCTs and provides practical guidance on undertaking a qualitative study with a trial. This part covers the full cycle of a qualitative study, providing hints and tips for qualitative researchers working with RCTs, from writing research proposals, developing research questions, data collection and analysis, integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, to publishing journal articles. It is important to note that the book is not an in-depth guide to qualitative methods. Throughout part two, some aspects of qualitative research were only briefly mentioned. For example, qualitative methods and approaches to analysis, are summarised in tables 9.1 and 10.1 but little detail is provided on how to conduct these methods. This is also evident in some chapters, such as the section on sampling. For example, data saturation is described as “a good justification for final sample sizes in studies” (p109) but an understanding of what data saturation is or means is assumed. O’Cathain includes a section on ‘research participants’, which guides the reader as to who they may wish to involve and why. Further detail regarding involving specific participant groups (e.g. children and young people) in qualitative studies with a trial may also have been of benefit. For example, would the approach one adopts to recruiting children and young people in a qualitative study with a trial differ, compared to a standalone qualitative study? It’s not quite clear. Others (e.g. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) offer more comprehensive guides to qualitative methods, but O’Cathain is clear in her introduction that the book is designed to be used in conjunction with other books and methodological journal articles.

In part two and throughout, ‘case studies’ of research projects are detailed to provide illustrative examples of research methods and processes in action, which are extremely valuable in demonstrating how the guidance can be applied in ‘real-life’ studies and how one might wish to design their own qualitative study with a trial. The final chapter in part two focuses on assessing the quality of qualitative research undertaken with trials and provides further guidance on how to optimise methodological rigor.

Part three focuses on engaging relevant stakeholders. In particular, this part provides guidance on how to optimise multidisciplinary team working and qualitative research value and it highlights a range of stakeholder groups one might wish to involve. O’Cathain offers some guidance on conducting patient and public involvement (PPI). As PPI is an increasingly important aspect of research design and conduct, this section provides a useful overview but may have benefited from a worked example, to further demonstrate how PPI may take shape as part of a qualitative study with a trial but also, to further distinguish the unique objectives of PPI from qualitative research that are commonly confused. The final chapter focuses on impact on health, health care and policy. This chapter succinctly summarises the potential benefit of qualitative research with a trial and the potential reach of findings that could be achieved through following the guidance.

There have been numerous journal articles in recent years offering some guidance regarding conducting qualitative studies with trials but O’Cathain has synthesised previous research and further supplemented this guidance to produce this book. Covering theory and practice, it is a valuable tool, especially for any researcher or student embarking on designing or conducting a qualitative study with a trial.

**Reference List**

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.