

Celebrating Uncertainty in Qualitative Research

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Abstract:

Edited by Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major, *New Approaches to Qualitative Research: Wisdom and Uncertainty* offers a relevant contribution to the field of qualitative inquiry by highlighting new, emerging approaches to qualitative research. The central guiding concepts of the book are wisdom and uncertainty and the volume is structured accordingly in three parts reflecting on wisdom that underlies uncertainties in stance, approach, and space. The topics addressed range from locating values and truths in qualitative research to questions about responsible ethics, from discussing the benefits of narrative theory and ethnodrama to a qualitative approach to questioning culture through the corporeal and exploring the politics of space. Although the vast majority of contributors come from educational or health research, the explorative approaches tackled here and ethical dilemmas related to a qualitative approach exceed disciplinary borders. This also justifies the editorial claim that the volume is intended for a specialist audience in a broad range of subject areas.

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Savin-Baden, Maggi and Claire Howell Major (eds.): *New Approaches to Qualitative Research: Wisdom and Uncertainty*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 182 pp, paperback, €48.95. ISBN: 0-451-57241-X

Qualitative research has long struggled with the question of how to approach social reality and how to represent the results through academic text. *New Approaches to Qualitative Research: Wisdom and Uncertainty* offers non-traditional ways of imagining the qualitative research process and its products. The central argument of editors Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major is that although qualitative researchers have rejected the notions of objectivity and absolute truth, many have not yet considered the application of uncertainty to their own work, which could lead to advancement of knowledge and wisdom (p. 172). The editors regard wisdom and uncertainty as interrelated states of being, encouraging researchers to accept uncertainty as a helpful part of qualitative inquiry (p. 3).

Savin-Baden (UK) and Howell Major (US) are both professors of higher education. The other 19 contributors have a background in either educational or health research. Nevertheless, as the central aspects addressed are the stance, methods, and space in qualitative inquiry, the contributions are by no means bound to any specific discipline and can bring insights to researchers from different fields. The volume contains a glossary explaining the use of different concepts, which facilitates following the 17 chapters with diverse conceptual and methodological focus. Echoing the qualitative research process, the book is divided into three parts: Stances, Methodologies and methods, and Places and spaces. The chapters provide practical examples of how researchers have grappled with difficult and important questions and shaped their approaches and reports.

The first part deals with locating the researchers in relation to their subjects, participants, and their own belief systems, as well as the ways in which they position themselves across the research paradigm. Ethics is tackled by several authors in this section as a relevant issue closely related to the question of certainty/uncertainty in scientific research. Bruce Macfarlane questions the dominant bioscientific interpretations of research ethics in his article "Values and virtues in qualitative research". Examining the effects of imposing this approach on qualitative research, he argues that bioscientific ethics is biased against a qualitative approach by assuming the predictability of methodology with a predefined set of absolute principles (p. 19). Macfarlane also criticizes the resulting politically correct language usage, which positions the researcher as a neutral scientific investigator and produces scripted, inauthentic communication, contradicting qualitative research endeavours (p. 21). To discern formal procedural

ethics from ethics in practice, he proposes the use of virtue theory: an approach based on the dictates of conscience and experience instead of external regulations (p. 25). Macfarlane's lament can serve as a timely warning for qualitative researchers and related institutions in continental Europe to avoid the pitfalls of adapting the principalist formal ethics.

Chapters in part two provide insights into the internal workings of several up-to-date explorative qualitative techniques including ethnodrama, participatory action research, and deliberative inquiry. Especially fascinating is the universal applicability of narrative theory in improving the quality of research process and text production. In their article "Narrative theory and the construction of qualitative texts" Julia Colyar and Karri Holley argue that using narrative elements more actively in representing the results of qualitative research allows for new perspectives for both the researcher and the readers: "The questions that arise from applying narrative elements require researchers to confront many of the thorny issues embedded in all qualitative representations, including the role of the researcher and the presentations of participants and events. Examining these questions in concert allows scholars to see the connections between presentation and argument, or the ways in which how a story is told is part of the story itself." (p. 77). An important issue briefly mentioned in this article concerns the ways in which research results can gain wider resonance in society. Colyar and Holley suggest that because awareness of narrative constructs highlights the role of the researcher as a storyteller, it also points them more towards readers outside their own fields, thus facilitating communication between researchers and societies (p. 78).

Chapters in part three argue for a more active inclusion of spatial ways of knowing and meaning-making into qualitative research. Paddy O'Toole finds in her article "Locating space in qualitative research: questioning culture through the corporeal" that in attempts to investigate the complex interrelationships of human life, and contribute to the human understanding of these phenomena, the worlds of concepts, ideas, interaction, and action have been privileged over the corporeal world (p. 122). By providing interesting examples from her own research, using the grounded theory methodology, O'Toole argues for including considerations of space in the research methods, data collection, and analysis phase. This enables researchers to gain new perspectives, inviting challenging questions and contradictions while helping to develop rich, nuanced explanations of social life (p. 129). She concludes that inclusion of the voice of the spatial in qualitative research accounts adds valuable detail, depth, and richness to the analysis while also allowing space to accept fallibility.

However, this book is not a "route-map" as the editors claim it to be. It is an exciting and brief overview, good for sparking insights and inspiration, but not for choosing the road – especially not for the undergraduates included in the target audience. Giving rise to a multitude of questions and brimming with uncertainty, it provides stimulating reading for researchers who are already well versed in qualitative research. For those readers, the uncertain and somewhat uncomfortable spaces discussed in this book are highly valuable as they offer countless possibilities for reflection as well as possible ideas for further projects.