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Creative Combinations in Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

In *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives*, Lynn Butler-Kisber offers students of qualitative research a valuable resource that provides useful foundational information about both traditional and arts-based qualitative methods. At the same time, by bringing a discussion of these various methodological approaches together into one text, the book inspires possibilities for creative combinations in qualitative research design.

Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry, Methodology, Thematic, Narrative, and Arts-Based Research

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Creative Combinations in Qualitative Inquiry

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In Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives, Lynn Butler-Kisber offers students of qualitative research a valuable resource that provides useful foundational information about both traditional and arts-based qualitative methods. At the same time, by bringing a discussion of these various methodological approaches together into one text, the book inspires possibilities for creative combinations in qualitative research design. Key Words: *Qualitative Inquiry, Methodology, Thematic, Narrative, and Arts-Based Research*

As someone preparing to teach a course in Qualitative Research Design this summer, I consider the publication of *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* by Lynn Butler-Kisber (2010) an example of cosmic good timing. There are many excellent resources for students and faculty of qualitative research methodology to draw upon, but Butler-Kisber's new book offers something unique among the books written as introductory texts in qualitative research by drawing together both traditional and art-based approaches to qualitative inquiry in one tome.

A number of books written as texts on qualitative research come to the subject from a standpoint grounded in the social sciences. Creswell (2007) introduces readers to the five most prominent traditions in qualitative research: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative research, and case study, and helps those who are new to qualitative research see how their studies might differ depending upon the approach they select. Patton (2002) provides clear and detailed information to guide the researcher in conducting a qualitative study using these traditional approaches. Neither of these books attempts to explore in depth the more pioneering methods emerging in qualitative inquiry such as those grouped under the heading Arts-Based Research (ABR). Researchers employing these methods are frequently influenced by the theory and practice of the arts and humanities. Helping to further this line of inquiry are some excellent series of new sources available for those interested exclusively in ABR. These works include Leavy's *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (2009; see Chenail, 2008, for a review), *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice* edited by Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund (2008), as well as the substantive and substantial *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* edited by J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole (2008), which brings together numerous exemplars of different arts-based methods.

While all of these resources for students of qualitative research provide valuable information and helpful guidance, their focus on either traditional or arts-based methods of qualitative inquiry perhaps inadvertently perpetuates the notion that one must choose between these two approaches when conducting a qualitative study, that one must either be "scientific" or "artistic". *Qualitative Inquiry* (2010), however, encompasses a range of qualitative methods from grounded theory to performative inquiry. In contrast to the

traditional divide between scientific and artistic qualitative research approaches (see Eisner, 1981), Butler-Kisber proposes “a new typology for classifying qualitative inquiry, that qualitative inquiry can be subdivided into three basic types of inquiry: *thematic*, *narrative*, and *arts-informed*” (p. 8). She suggests that qualitative traditions such as grounded theory and phenomenology essentially rely upon categorization in developing a thematic interpretation of qualitative data, and she juxtaposes this approach with the connecting approaches of narrative methods. This notion of connection in narrative research applies to both connecting a social phenomenon to individual stories, as well as connecting researcher and participant in a more intimate way than in some other methodologies. The chapters on grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative research offer a clearly-written, thoughtful introduction, but students would need to deepen their understanding of these three qualitative methods by looking to works that explain these methods in more detail before attempting to design or conduct a study using one of these traditions.

In the following chapters, Butler-Kisber (2010) describes practices and considerations associated with using poetic, collage, photographic, and performative inquiry. In each case, she highlights how these approaches are being used in qualitative research, provides helpful examples, and openly discusses some of the ethical challenges being debated in regards to these more pioneering methods. The author’s writing style is accessible and engaging, and I encourage those interested in an overview of arts-based research to look to this text for an introduction.

I confess that prior to reading this book, I was one of those qualitative researchers who, consciously or not, saw qualitative research based on the five traditions and arts-based research as falling into two distinct camps—one grounded in the social sciences and the other rooted in the arts and humanities (Eisner, 1981). I have thought of myself as standing on the side of “rigor” by designing my qualitative studies in accordance with the principles and practices of social science research. Yet many years before returning to graduate school for a doctorate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, I had been an English major in my undergraduate studies, editing the college literary magazine and publishing a few poems following graduation from college. I felt attracted to arts-based research but struggled with issues such as trustworthiness and credibility of data in these methods.

Reading *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (2010) is helping me to resolve some of these concerns and consider ways to draw upon arts-based methods within a more traditional research design. While this may not have been Butler-Kisber’s primary intent, the fact that these methods are presented together within one text inspired me with new ideas for ways to creatively combine approaches within a single study. For example, having recently completed a phenomenological study, as I read *Qualitative Inquiry*, I found myself thinking that in my next phenomenological study I could use collage as a bracketing exercise—gathering images that I associate with the topic under study as a method that would contribute to sensitizing me to my preconceived ideas and biases related to the topic. Along the same lines, I can see that poetic inquiry would be useful in phenomenology because poems so effectively capture the essence of something. While I may not choose to use poetic forms exclusively in presenting my findings, I can see that a found poem, drawn from a participant’s words in an interview transcript, could effectively portray the essence of their lived experience of a

particular social phenomenon. I also can see ways in which using these arts-informed methods in classroom exercises would assist students in grasping something of the philosophical perspectives of qualitative research.

In an insightful remark regarding collage inquiry that could apply to all of the arts-informed inquiry, Butler-Kisber (2010) notes,

It is a slippery slope. On the one hand, the floodgates can open and “anything goes”, and on the other hand, an elitist form of gate-keeping dominates, repeating the very thinking that postmodernism has tried to overturn....Given the potential of collage to create new understandings and bring unconscious dimensions of experience to the fore, I would advocate that collage inquiry need not be relegated to specific occasions. Rather, the decision is when to use collage as an exploratory/analytical approach, when it should become a public representational form, and when it should be both. (p. 118)

Her observation reminds us that in making research design choices we should also be mindful of our research questions first and then select a design, artistic or otherwise, that will allow us to investigate our question in the most fitting and rigorous way possible.

Butler-Kisber (2010) concludes the book with a reflection on future directions in qualitative inquiry. She notes that there is a need for scholars to engage in more discussion regarding evaluation of arts-based research and for researchers to obtain preparation in the artistic skills associated with ABR just as they train in the more traditional skills associated with qualitative research. These points are well-taken, as was the book as a whole.

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