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The Messy World of Reflexivity: Qualitative Journey

Abstract

Qualitative Journeys is an insightful study and guide of the messy world of reflexivity in qualitative research. The difficulties are compounded as both mentors and students struggle with this prickly issue. Qualitative Journeys opens the space within which qualitative research is done and allows the reader to tag along on reflexive treks that exemplify the often messy processes that result when students and mentors undertake the qualitative walkabout.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Reflexivity, Positionality, Mentors and Students

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The Messy World of Reflexivity: *Qualitative Journeys*

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Qualitative Journeys is an insightful study and guide of the messy world of reflexivity in qualitative research. The difficulties are compounded as both mentors and students struggle with this prickly issue. Qualitative Journeys opens the space within which qualitative research is done and allows the reader to tag along on reflexive treks that exemplify the often messy processes that result when students and mentors undertake the qualitative walkabout. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Reflexivity, Positionality, Mentors and Students

Qualitative Journeys is a collaborative effort between Australian and American researchers designed to present an innovative approach to qualitative research. Intended to be a resource book for students and professionals in adult education, human services, social sciences, health and related fields, the purpose of the book is to “prepare readers, both novice student researchers and their experienced mentor researchers, about the complex journey and partnership they are about to undertake” (p. vii). True to its name and stated purpose, *Qualitative Journeys* opens the space within which qualitative research is done and allows the reader to tag along on reflexive treks that exemplify the often messy processes that result when students and mentors undertake the qualitative walkabout.

The book is divided into three topical sections. The first two chapters look at the personal nature of qualitative research and a review of the nature and types of qualitative research. Providing a cue to what is to come later in the text, editors Victor Minichiello and Jeffrey Kottler provide the reader with how they come to this place in their own qualitative journeys in the first chapter. This type of recursive reflexivity is characteristic of the research stories presented in the book. Indeed, it would be impossible to create a text that promises what *Qualitative Journeys* does promise without this type of meta-cognitive explication. Minichiello and Kottler set the tone for the rest of the book with their stories and then invite the reader to join the expedition when they state that, “you can’t understand qualitative research without understanding your personality – that is, your own motives, interests, values, and goals” (p. 7). Subjectivity is not only honored in the qualitative journeys undertaken but is deemed essential to the process. The reflexive examination of this subjective environment of individual positionality is not an isolated act but a continual process in qualitative research and is presented as such. Chapter Two is a review of qualitative research theories and methods, including constructivist theory, symbolic interactionism, postmodern and feminist theories, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and grounded theory analysis. This overview of research theories, itself, recommends the book for consideration as a useful companion text for the study of qualitative methods in postsecondary education.

In the second section of the text the chapter authors examine their journeys as student researchers and mentors as they practice the transparent subjectivity that brings rigor to qualitative research. This section is the heart of the book and it beats with the passion that drives qualitative researchers to do what they do in the manner in which they do it. Included are sections dealing with (a) methods and methodologies including narrative inquiry, radical reflexivity, grounded theory, mixed methods, phenomenology, discourse analysis, focus groups, and interviews; (b) relationships and how they are experienced in qualitative research; (c) how the vision impairment of one researcher led to the choice of qualitative research; (d) using unobtrusive methods in qualitative research; (e) transgender research; and (f)

integrating theory and method in qualitative research to promote social change. The essence of doing qualitative research emerges as these student researchers and mentors tell their stories.

In the last section of the book Minichiello and Kottler attempt to draw themes from without the collective experiences in the text and presents this collection as a qualitative work, in and of itself. They utilize the same reflexivity that is used in each of the individual works and apply it to the book as a whole. Presented as lessons gleaned from the qualitative research experience are the emergence of skepticism about objective truth and learning to be flexible in conducting research, as well as becoming a more astute researcher as subjective reflexivity is practiced.

One concern about the book is that the cutting-edge nature of the studies may be foreign to students and professionals not acquainted with the emerging trends in qualitative research. The concept of radical reflexivity, although it has appeared in the research literature of other fields, is an emerging paradigm in adult education. This means that it still struggles against the dominant paradigms holding sway in this field and may seem radical, indeed, to researchers grounded in more traditional methods. It would, however, be unfortunate if paradigm paralysis prevented researchers, both student from exploring *Qualitative Journeys* and remaining ignorant of the gems awaiting those who choose the less traveled path of qualitative inquiry.

References

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