



3-1-2011

Denzin's The Qualitative Manifesto Book Summary and Critique

Lise M. Allen

University of Calgary, lmallen@ucalgary.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Allen, L. M. (2011). Denzin's The Qualitative Manifesto Book Summary and Critique . *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 580-586.
Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss2/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

LEARN MORE

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Denzin's The Qualitative Manifesto Book Summary and Critique

Abstract

Ethnography, Corporate Ethnography, and Corporate Research

Keywords

Book Review, Qualitative Manifesto, Ethnodrama, and Social Justice

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Denzin's *The Qualitative Manifesto* Book Summary and Critique

Lise M. Allen

University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

*By his not so subtle usage of a title that echoes of Karl Marx's engine of revolution, Norman K. Denzin's *The Qualitative Manifesto: A Call to Arms*, is an invitation for action intended for those who would flock to the standards of critical inquiry and social justice. Denzin's atypical approach does two things: Firstly, he promotes the unity of qualitative inquirers in the promotion of social justice; and secondly, he uses performative ethnodrama as an example of how to teach qualitative inquiry. Although I question Denzin's choice in borrowing power from a book that led to so much violence, I would recommend this book to persons who are interested in using ethnodrama as a teaching/advocacy method. Key Words: Book Review, *Qualitative Manifesto*, Ethnodrama, Social Justice.*

"I want a discourse that troubles the world" (2010, p. 10) states Denzin in explaining his reasons for writing his book, *The Qualitative Manifesto*. This answers one of my questions of why someone would title a book after Marx's engine of revolution *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1848) which left upwards of 100,000,000 corpses in its tracks (Wiker, 2008). Some authors (Findlay, 2004; Harvey, 2008) would disagree with that unenthusiastic opinion of Marx's work and state that the Manifesto of The Communist Party (1848) serves as an inspiration to make the world a better place. It is perhaps with that idea in mind that Denzin chose to name his text after Marx's grand vision.

Certainly, Denzin (2010) sets the revolutionary tone early in his book by mentioning both Karl Marx and author C. Wright Mills's book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) as his inspiration for writing *The Qualitative Manifesto*. Denzin proves that his goals are no less extreme as these authors when he states that "For Mills, as it was for Marx, our project is to change society, not just interpret or write about [it]" (p. 9). Undoubtedly, the book itself is written in the spirit of both of those authors, as Denzin states that he intends to create a work that is moral, methodological, and political. It is also a continuation of a previous book by Denzin, *Qualitative Inquiry Under Fire* (2009) which ended with a call for a roadmap that would guide critical scholars into the new century.

The Qualitative Manifesto is both "an invitation and call to arms" (2010, p. 10) intended for those who would flock to the standards of critical inquiry and social justice. Why a call to arms? Denzin declares that critical researchers are under attack from science-based research on the one hand and postpositivists, mixed methods and traditional qualitative researchers on the other. In order to combat this, Denzin insists that qualitative researchers—whether critical or traditional—must make an effort to define

themselves as a global community by creating their own methods of evaluation and strategies of inquiry. As for strategies, Denzin himself leads by example by using his book as a vehicle to present his approach to teaching critical inquiry, performative ethnodrama. Before doing so, he begins by providing the reader with a concise history of qualitative thought.

In his introduction, Denzin (2010) familiarizes the reader with a fascinating discussion of the eight historical moments, stressing the final moment, “the future,” which the author explains, is now. In “the future,” research is concerned with moral discourse and critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, etc. This brief history of paradigmatic thought forms a base by which the author concludes that critical scholars must transcend the holdovers from politically conservative post-positivism. It is an informative read for anyone either unfamiliar with the rise of qualitative and critical inquiry or for those who wish to refresh themselves on the subject. He continues the next chapter with the history of paradigmatic conflicts within research, but before doing so, he charges the reader with a universal call to arms.

In chapter one, Denzin (2010) states: “today we are called to change the world” (p. 32). How is this lofty goal to be accomplished? Denzin proposes that this new world be realized through the critical frameworks presented by Mills (1959), James (1901), Freire (2001), hooks (2005), and West (1989). He then follows with a remarkably brief but informative summary of the emergence of critical inquiry placed within the paradigm wars of the 1980s up to present-day ideologies. He continues the debate between the scientific-based ideology and the critical ones by openly discussing the common criticisms of critical inquiry while making reprisals to those arguments. “In the spirit of inclusion” (p. 19), he invites researchers to open the dialog between the factions. He concludes the chapter by introducing performative ethnodrama as a creative way to teach interpretive inquiry as well as by laying out some criteria for judging qualitative work.

The eclectic mix of points that is included in this chapter are by no means new to readers who are familiar with the critical branch of qualitative inquiry. However, those persons starting out in the field of critical inquiry may find this chapter very useful in providing a summation of not only the history of critical inquiry but of the criteria that is included within that approach. What is innovative in this chapter is Denzin’s (2010) introduction of critical performance as a means by which social justice inquiry can materialize. In the next chapter, the author expands on some of these themes.

In chapter two, the author continues with encouraging researchers from quantitative and qualitative paradigms to continue an open discussion on resistant discourses. Genially, he says “reasonable people can agree to disagree” (2010, p. 34). He frames discourse as a way of reforming social research that is inclusive rather than inflexible. He then continues the chapter by presenting the viewpoints of several critiques of postmodernism, followed by defenses of those attacks which elucidate further his critical viewpoint. The author follows by presenting an ideological discussion regarding the politics of evidence. For those who enjoy Denzin’s historical synopsis of paradigmatic thought, this chapter does not disappoint as he also includes a short history of post-positivistic thinking. He then borrows from author Guba (1990) to inform the reader of practical ways that the qualitative community can work together. In moving forward, Denzin emphasizes that there should be less conflict between alternative

paradigm proponents since it is vital that the interpretive communities—critical or otherwise—work together toward the advancement of social justice.

What is welcome in this chapter is Denzin's call not only for the interpretive communities to come together but for all communities to engage in dialog and to be open to critiques from both their own paradigm and that of others. Although he clearly disagrees with the scientific-based communities' understanding of evidence, he refreshingly points out that "the interpretive camp is not anti-science" (2010, p. 38). As for originality, this chapter is somewhat deficient. Although it points towards an agenda for the future, that agenda is not a novel one since it is borrowed from another author (Guba, 1990). In the next chapter, the author continues to demarcate the differences between the traditionalist and interpretive approaches while at the same time bridging the gap between the two approaches by emphasizing how interpretive scholars can learn from their traditional colleagues.

Denzin (2010) begins chapter three by explicating on the "work of the future" (p. 44) for the interpretive community. That utopian future of social justice begins with the setting aside of binaries in favor of the blurring of genres. In this new world there will no longer be the conflicts between the old and new; instead, boundaries become less clear in interpretive frameworks, which as a result will give rise to mixed research methods. Secondly, the author urges researchers to become active agents of social change; and thirdly, he states that there must be rules and criteria for assessing research quality. In assessing research, the author contrasts the different ways traditionalists and the interpretive community view guidelines. He states that interpretive inquirers argue that all guidelines are moral and ethical whereas traditionalists believe them to be apolitical. Despite inferring that interpretive inquirers take the moral high road, Denzin does admit that the interpretive community can learn from traditionalists. He then goes on to suggest some interpretive criteria as presented by various other critical inquiry authors. The author ends this chapter with another reminder that performative inquiry is an important way in which social and human conditions can be portrayed.

Although Denzin (2010) emphasizes that binary oppositions no longer work, he tends to write in terms of traditionalists versus interpretivists. Nonetheless, what is admirable about this chapter is that he clearly delineates the ideologies between the two paradigmatic camps without dethroning the proposals of the traditionalists, something that other interpretive writers might be tempted to do. Instead, receptive to alternative ideas without diminishing his own, he says of the traditionalist criteria for judging research: "we can learn from these guidelines" (p. 48). Moving from assessment guidelines to the practical side of teaching qualitative research, the author presents in chapter four his template for qualitative pedagogy.

The author begins this chapter by reviewing his experiences in teaching qualitative research and discusses the difficulties in doing so because, while there is a lot of literature devoted to methodology, there are not a lot of texts on how to teach it with one notable exception, Hurworth (2008). The real substance of this chapter; however, is his template for teaching qualitative inquiry—a template that uses a unique style of performative ethnography, which he refers to as the "mystory." The mystory concept consists of a personal narrative and interactive dramatic performance intended to critique social structures. He outlines the four-stage dramatic cycle that makes up a mystory, with

advice on how students and teachers alike can go about writing and performing one. The author concludes by giving an example of a mystery from his own life.

The one deficiency in chapter four, and thus the book, is that Denzin is not entirely clear about why performative ethnography can help students learn about qualitative inquiry better than any other method. However, if one accepts the premise that ethnodrama is helpful as a teaching tool; this chapter is beneficial because of its practical presentation of how to go about engaging in this method. The author not only outlines how to create an ethnodrama, but he is also openly candid in providing examples from his own life that make explicit the mystery concept. Those who are interested in doing performative ethnodrama will find this chapter helpful. This is not the only place where performative ethnographies are addressed in the text, as we see in chapter five.

In chapter five, the author states very clearly that his goal is to outline a code of ethics with a social justice agenda. He begins by stating his purpose of creating a code of ethics before going on to indicate some of the controversies behind creating a new code. The author continues by relating his struggles to install ethical guidelines with a critical agenda within his own institution. In order to demonstrate those challenges, he presents a one-act play documenting the controversies found within that conflict. Finally, readers are asked to refer to Appendix Two, where the author presents his code of ethics with a social justice agenda.

Because of the unique method of explicating his viewpoint, the author is able to accomplish many things in this chapter. By writing about the challenges that attend the adoption of ethical guidelines in the first part of the chapter, and then demonstrating and accentuating his point via a one-act play in the second part of the chapter, the author is doubly able to express to the reader the conflicts that besiege the creation of ethical guidelines. At the same time, he uses this chapter to reveal once again how performative ethnodrama can be used as a teaching tool. This chapter continues to be useful by presenting some ethical guidelines (presumably created by the author), which, like his model of the mystery, transform this book from not just a call to change but providing the practical building blocks in order to do so. Not having finished with his discourse on guidelines, in the next chapter the author provides suggestions for reading and writing in the experimental formats found in interpretive writing.

In chapter six, Denzin (2010) begins by recounting the difficulties that experimental writers have in publishing in mainstream qualitative literature. The author then presents some criteria that should be contained in this type of writing. This is followed by his suggestion that editors use this same framework in reading interpretive work. The author next takes up the criticisms of the literary-narrative turn as presented by the more traditional qualitative communities, especially those criticisms in opposition to poetry or free verse. Next, the author uses a poetic exemplar and a one-scene play to counter the criticisms against using such frameworks for writing. Denzin summarizes this chapter by exhorting writers and editors alike to work together if they hope for interpretive writing to find a place within current discourse.

I might add that pointing out the disparities between the research communities is not helpful to the fulfillment of one of Denzin's (2010) objectives, that of bringing the qualitative community together in order to strengthen it. Yet, the author never directly attacks anyone in his book; instead, he defends the criticisms directed at the more experimental forms of writing. More than that, he takes it a step further by urging

qualitative inquirers to find a common ground: “The two interpretive communities should find a respectful way to communicate with one another” (p. 93). This bridging of the genres is a helpful way to bring about the realization of his goal of strengthening the global community of qualitative researchers. Another way of strengthening inquiry is for the formation of a template that can provide a foundational model for this type of inquiry, which is addressed in the following chapter.

In chapter seven, the author stresses the need for emancipatory visions that inspire transformation. He calls for a model that is broad enough to be used with a wide variety of populations. He indicates that this template must include an ethical framework that is human rights based. The author then presents a play that illustrates the importance of conducting research that includes an ethic of responsibility and a critical social agenda. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of what a social justice inquiry template should include.

The play that Denzin (2010) presents here is an informative one that discusses the theories of Paulo Freire along with some of the challenges that are present in creating a template for critical inquiry. What is not present here, however, is a template for social justice inquiry, as the chapter title, *Templates for Social Justice Inquiry*, would suggest. What Denzin does include is what he believes should be contained in a template; however, the items that he lists are by no means new ideas; and I believe that the chapter would have been improved with the inclusion of some sample templates. Conversely, one might assume that the performative ethnodrama that he refers to throughout the book is meant to be the template that addresses the social justice agenda. In the next chapter, the author reiterates his call to action.

The author begins chapter eight stating, “Qualitative research scholars have an obligation to change the world” (2010, p. 115), and he notes that he hopes each chapter can serve as a catalyst for that kind of change. He concludes this short chapter with his utopian vision of the future where social justice will be realized. In the last paragraph, Denzin states that he hopes that this book will advance his dream towards that future.

Conclusion

According to Marx, the fulfillment of the utopian dream requires the disappearance of an entirely corrupt class through a communist revolution. This makes me question why Denzin (2010) would choose to name his book after Marx’s famous manifesto, especially since it inspired so many violent revolutions. Denzin’s book does have a similar structure as the Manifesto in that it is about the same length, and has some of the same thematic elements, such as calling for the unity of a group of people. However, where the Manifesto calls for violence: “Let the ruling classes tremble at a communistic revolution” (Harvey, 2008, p. 84); Denzin’s approach is radically different. Denzin boldly states that this book is a call to arms. Many of the calls, however, are not that of arms but rather of action, not the least of which is the building of a community that can work together to promote qualitative inquiry, especially critical inquiry. It is to the author’s credit that he does not incite ill will against other research communities but instead encourages unity among critical inquirers and other paradigmatic researchers, while at the same time motivating the reader to work towards greater social change through critical inquiry.

Nonetheless, the book seems to lack continuity. In my opinion, this book appears to be a *mélange* of two differing schemas. On the one hand, it clearly functions as a catalyst for global social change. Denzin (2010) repeatedly urges qualitative inquirers to change the world through critical inquiry: “Today we are called to change the world” (p. 32); “The goal is to change the world” (p. 90); “as global citizens, we are no longer called to just interpret the world...we are called to change the world” (p. 103); and “Qualitative research scholars have an obligation to change the world” (p. 115). The book also contains practical advice in alignment with his “road map” or agenda for the future with the inclusion of a template for teaching and an ethical code. Yet the book seems oddly disjointed. He nicely pulls together ideological thought with pragmatic solutions but ends with the promotion of performative ethnodrama. Although this is an interesting form of critical inquiry teaching and advocacy, it does not logically flow from the global calls for action that form the theme of the rest of the book. His focus on the usage of these dramas tends to make the book appear to be a vehicle by which he can promote his model of teaching critical inquiry. If it is meant to be part of the “agenda to carry us into the new century” (p. 16), then it does do that; however, that would make that agenda somewhat narrow, as it would only be used by critical inquirers who are interested in using performative ethnodrama as their model of teaching or advocacy.

On page 49, Denzin (2010) states, in referring to social justice inquiry, that “original work challenges existing understandings and arguments and offers new insights.” Interestingly, I don’t think he does that in this work. Denzin’s motivational writing may be persuasive to some, but nothing in his book seems original or new except for his promotion of performative ethnodrama as a teaching tool for students of social justice inquiry. The book also contains a number of editing errors, and it probably would have benefited from having been proofread a little more carefully before publication.

I would recommend this book to persons who are interested in using ethnodrama as a form of advocacy or as a teaching tool. The practical examples along with the teaching template provided by the author make this book extremely useful for those who wish to both learn from and teach ethnodrama as a form of social justice. The author indicates in his book that he has been teaching qualitative inquiry for four decades and those who are starting out in their teaching career or those who are looking for a new approach would be wise to take advantage of Denzin’s experience in this area. I also would recommend this book to those who would like to learn more about the rise of qualitative thought and the paradigm wars but do not wish to read a lengthy report. Denzin’s concise histories throughout the first part of his book are an informative way to do so.

I find it unsettling that Denzin (2010), in the title for his book, would borrow from a work that led to so much destruction in the world. He must be aware, as any well-read person would be, of the history of the revolutions throughout the world that caused the death of so many millions. I believe that the book has been misnamed because it is not a call to arms, nor does it have violent underpinnings. Instead, Denzin’s approach is one of peaceful and diplomatic unity that emphasizes the coming together of peoples and thought, yet it does not fail to remember the critical human rights agenda.

References

- Denzin, N. K. (2009). *Qualitative inquiry under fire: Toward a new paradigm dialogue*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (2010). *The qualitative manifesto: A call to arms*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Findlay, L. M. (Ed.). (2004). *The communist manifesto*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview.
- Freire, P. (2001). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Guba, E. G. (1990). Carrying on the dialog. In E. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog* (pp. 17-30). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Harvey, D. (Ed.). (2008). *The communist manifesto*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- hooks, b. (2005). *Teaching to community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hurworth, R. E. (2008). *Teaching qualitative research: Cases and issues*. Rotterdam, Holland: Sense.
- James, W. (1901). *The meaning of truth*. New York, NY: Longmans.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *Manifesto of the communist party*. London, UK: Communist League.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- West, C. E. (1989). *The American evasion of philosophy: A genealogy of pragmatism*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wiker, B. (2008). *10 books that screwed up the world and 5 others that didn't help*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery.

Author Note

Lise M. Allen is with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lise Allen, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, PF3256, 2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, Canada. E-mail: lmallen@ucalgary.ca

Copyright 2011: Lise M. Allen and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Allen, L. M. (2011). Denzin's *The Qualitative Manifesto* book summary and critique. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 580-586. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/allen.pdf>