



The Qualitative Report

Volume 18 | Number 13

Book Review 3

4-1-2013

Exploring the Methodology of Getting Lost with Patti Lather

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Recommended APA Citation

Fotheringham, S. (2013). Exploring the Methodology of Getting Lost with Patti Lather. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(13), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss13/3>

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Exploring the Methodology of Getting Lost with Patti Lather

Abstract

In this article I review the book *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts towards a Double(d) science* (Lather, 2007) from the perspective of a feminist social worker. Lather, using herself and her previous research with women as example, explores feminist methodological issues of loss of authority and loss of innocence as a means towards the creation of new forms of knowledge. This complex book, while extraordinarily difficult, provides the reader with a rare opportunity of getting lost – in the literal sense - in the postmodern poise while simultaneously opening the reader up to new ways of knowing. For feminists and social workers with fortitude and commitment, this book, when complete, offers several golden possibilities for methodological reflection.

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Keywords

Feminism, Social Work, Methodology, Research

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Exploring the Methodology of *Getting Lost* with Patti Lather

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*In this article I review the book *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts towards a Double(d) science* (Lather, 2007) from the perspective of a feminist social worker. Lather, using herself and her previous research with women as example, explores feminist methodological issues of loss of authority and loss of innocence as a means towards the creation of new forms of knowledge. This complex book, while extraordinarily difficult, provides the reader with a rare opportunity of getting lost – in the literal sense -in the postmodern poise while simultaneously opening the reader up to new ways of knowing. For feminists and social workers with fortitude and commitment, this book, when complete, offers several golden possibilities for methodological reflection. Keywords: Feminism, Social Work, Methodology, Research*

Patti Lather's feminist, postmodernist, methodological book *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts towards a Double(d) science* (2007) is an excruciatingly difficult read. The actual reading of this book elicits the precise experience in which Lather argues on behalf: getting lost. With Lather's postmodernist language, astounding depth and theoretical and philosophical complexities, any reader who is not well versed in postmodernist feminist language would very likely get lost. Yet, despite the at times frustrating reading, it is also an intriguing experience. Filled with ambiguities, complexities and more questions than answers, it is captivating and absorbing. This book is not about answers, or even finding your way, it is about getting lost and why getting lost is so important. I cannot help but suspect this is right where Lather wants the reader to be.

Loss of Authority/Expertise

One of the first losses explored, is the loss of researcher expertise and authority. According to Lather, this is the place where "getting lost is something other to commanding, controlling, mastery" and a "problematizing the researcher as 'the one who knows' " (p. 11). Lather deconstructs notions of expert and authority and "instead situates oneself as curious and unknowing" (p. 9). This is in contrast to typical research books where the researcher is either positioned as the content expert, the methodological authority, or both.

Yet, Lather's references are beyond that of research practices; she is also arguing from an epistemological standpoint. She states, " 'Getting lost' might both produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently" (p. 13); an opening up of space that allows for new ways of knowing to emerge. This is an intriguing argument. If getting lost keeps one from being comfortable, sure of self and confident, then one is forced to question and ponder new ways of moving forward. When a person exists in a space that is unfamiliar, where they are vulnerable and exposed – a place of not knowing, of surrender, of reduced power – perhaps this is when naturally, the opportunity to see or understand something different surfaces.

Wilson (2008) alludes to a similar notion through an Indigenous research paradigm in his book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. He states, "research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers" (p. 6) suggesting new knowledge can emerge when research and the researcher are repositioned. For Wilson, the researcher is relocated as a storyteller, while for Lather, as a witness:

I trouble the ethics of reducing the fear, pain, joy and urgency of people's lives to analytic categories. Exploring the textual possibilities for telling stories that situate researchers not so much as experts "saying what things mean" in terms of "data," the researcher is situated as witness giving testimony to the lives of others. (p. 41)

Both Lather and Wilson assert new epistemological paradigms, where the "researcher" as expert does not exist and as a result, new forms of knowledge are unearthed.

In social work, discourse about sharing power in research, anti-oppressive research practice and the research participant as expert are apparent, yet there remains an underlying support for the researcher as expert despite these values. Lather offers the profession the possibility of pushing this loss of expertise even further, suggesting it as a form of methodology where new knowledge can emerge. Perhaps this is a way forward for the profession, a way to operationalize the values of power sharing and anti-oppression, but in a more synthesized manner.

Loss of Innocence

Secondly, Lather wrestles with the "loss of innocence of feminist methodology" (p. 38) and in particular, representational practices in research. Deconstructing feminism in this regard, she exclaims, how the "feminist researcher is no longer the hero of her own story" (p. 38). Lather posits that feminism has now been called to a place to re-examine "the unintended consequences" of earlier feminist efforts such as empowerment and reflexivity (p. 74). She instead calls for a form of feminism to:

Open up spaces of contestation in which no position is by nature correct, all positions are subject to critical investigation, and every position must be argued for, with no one position automatically at the centre. As feminists we believe that the meanings of human rights, liberation, community, and social justice cannot be assumed unproblematically anymore. (p. 114)

From this place of loss, Lather grapples with the representation of women in research, exploring new ways of feminist representation with women who were HIV positive in her book *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS* (Lather & Smithies, 1997). In this work she attempted to "write for a broad public audience, particularly the women participating in the study, but do so in a way that troubled habitual frames of representational space that too often offered such women up for consumption and voyeurism" (p. 35). Her goal of this work was not to better represent the women who participated, but to examine how feminist researchers can be more accountable after a loss of innocence. In line with feminism and representation, Foster (2007) too, notes that all researchers must contend with representation, arguing that "representational decisions cannot be avoided; they enter at numerous points in the research process, and qualitative analysts, including feminists, must confront them" (p. 371). For Lather, this confrontation involves a deconstruction of representation by repositioning the researcher away from that of expert and working from a place of loss of innocence. This is part of her methodology of getting lost.

Lather is so committed to this idea of getting lost as a way to create new knowledge that she also layers the book with emails, letters and personal communications in addition to extensive theory. One of the most exposing experiences she shares in the book, and one that best illustrates her commitment to these tenets of getting lost, is that which she has deemed "naked methodology" (p. 49). Lather orchestrated an experience where she sat naked in a

Jacuzzi tub surrounded by her clothed women academic colleagues while they grilled her about her research positionality with women and HIV. In an excerpt of this conversation, she eloquently describes her struggle with representation and researcher accountability:

To me its is such a compelling opportunity to be forced to think about what it means to be an academic researcher who pokes around in other peoples lives, in particular ways, for particular reasons, almost always, clothed in the rhetoric of doing good. (p. 55)

This one sentence, with the image of Lather in a Jacuzzi tub surrounded by colleagues, in what I see as an effort to “strip” herself of her authority and innocence, is profound and demands contemplation.

Examining this, in relation to social work, raises some interesting questions. Social work, as a profession, is clothed in the rhetoric of doing good and consequently, researchers often lean on this innocence leaving theory and epistemological paradigms unquestioned and unexamined. Orme’s (2003) article, ‘*It’s Feminist because I Say So!*’: *Feminism, Social Work and Critical Practice in the UK*, discusses how the field of social work has remained largely outside of these theoretical debates in the published literature. What has instead resulted is an avoidance of theory, and an argument based on the simplistic notion that because something is simply about women, it is evidence for feminist claims (Orme, 2003). The assumption rests on the belief that because someone is a feminist social worker, they are well meaning, and therefore, innocent. Lather, instead challenges this both theoretically in her writing, but also personally. Her bravery to confront the idea of feminist innocence can be borrowed and used to also challenge the innocence of social work in general. In Latherian terms, social work’s tenets cannot be assumed unproblematically anymore. As social workers, we need to “trouble” the waters of social work innocence and doing good within the realm of social work research.

Conclusion

In closing, Lather’s idea of getting lost as a way of creating new knowledge is compelling. She closes with, “This book has argued for a scientificity that is about imperfect information where incompleteness and indeterminacy are assets, more central elements of a scientific posture of getting lost as a way of knowing” (p. 161). Both the loss of researcher expertise and the loss of feminist methodological innocence are parts of this larger epistemological shift. Social work can benefit from this thinking by examining the idea of lost as a research methodology, or a mode to uncover new forms of knowledge. Social work must also begin to participate in theoretical discussions about feminism, representation, methodology and postmodernism. With our often limitless access to marginalized populations, we have something to gain from such discussions, as surely as we have something to offer. In short, social work could use some getting lost.

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Author Note

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Article Citation

Fotheringham, S. (2013). Exploring the methodology of *Getting Lost* with Patti Lather. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(Rev. 3), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/fotheringham3.pdf>
