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Indigenous and Emergent Methodologies: A Review of Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective

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Abstract

Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts' (2008) new edited work entitled *Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective* introduces its readers to emergent qualitative research and evaluation methodologies indigenous to urban policy studies. These local lessons can prove quite valuable for all qualitative researchers regardless their fields or discipline.

Keywords

Urban Policy, Qualitative Research, Indigenous Methodologies, Emergent Methodologies, Social Constructionism

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Indigenous and Emergent Methodologies: A Review of *Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective*

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*Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts' (2008) new edited work entitled *Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective* introduces its readers to emergent qualitative research and evaluation methodologies indigenous to urban policy studies. These local lessons can prove quite valuable for all qualitative researchers regardless their fields or discipline. Key Words: Urban Policy, Qualitative Research, Indigenous Methodologies, Emergent Methodologies, and Social Constructionism*

One of the benefits of working with authors from around the world as an editor of *The Qualitative Report* is I have the opportunity to learn what is happening locally with qualitative research methodology in various locals and from across disciplines and fields. I find it fascinating how researchers create new and novel approaches and applied extant designs and procedures to help them to address questions and problems unique to their settings both geographical and intellectual. These indigenous methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008) once discovered outside their local cultures then become the next wave of emergent resources (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008) from which all researchers can benefit.

Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective, the new edited book by Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts (2008) Volume 9 in the Studies in Qualitative Methodology series, not only serves as an insightful guide to these researchers working in urban policy and planning, housing studies, urban geography, anthropology, and community development, but also works as a portal for investigators studying outside the urban landscape to learn some emerging approaches to qualitative inquiry which are indigenous to qualitative urban research. In the book's eleven chapters the authors share the theoretical and methodological thinking regarding their qualitative research as well as their pragmatic approaches to their applied craft. In doing so we as global readers gain valuable insights into the ways in which these researchers conceptualize their research and adapt and adopt qualitative research methodologies to address their local problems.

To introduce us to this area of study, Maginn, Thompson, and Tonts (2008) review the "Pragmatic Renaissance" in Chapter One and explain how this latest moment in qualitative research has changed the landscape of urban studies. Although they acknowledge some vestiges of the qualitative-quantitative methods conflicts still remain in certain areas of urban policy, Maginn and his colleagues also note qualitative approaches bring their unique array of methodological solutions to urban-focused researchers. In championing the value of qualitative research findings to urban policy makers Maginn et al. suggest their colleagues consider a systematic style of applied qualitative research that would consist of

- Replication of research across (and within) broadly similar neighbourhoods;
- A core set of common methods to collect particular types of data
- A core set of common research questions systematically pursued across all neighbourhoods;
- A systematic style of language and notation enabling qualitative research methods and findings to be readily understood and accepted by policy makers; and
- Research findings presented in a conceptual (and quite possibly quantitative) format to illustrate relationships and correlations between variables. (p. 15)

In articulating their pragmatic approach it became clearer to me how practical urban analysis work appears to be especially outside of the university context and how this “real world” sensibility has helped to shape the qualitative methodologies which appear to be favored in this research and the nature in which these investigators carry out their studies. Their pragmatic suggestions also gave me insights into the different political challenges urban researchers face (i.e., academic politics over method and theory and urban policy politics over programs and resources) and how the results of their work affect not only the production of knowledge in urban sociology and anthropology, but also the management of social and political change in local and global communities.

One theoretical orientation Maginn, Thompson, and Tonts (2008) advocate for these pragmatic urban investigations is social constructionism. In Chapter Two, the authors, Tony Manzi and Keith Jacobs, explain the value of the theory, trace its history in urban research, and suggest researchers move beyond discourse analysis, the methodology traditionally favored by social construction theory focused qualitative urban researchers, to consider new concepts such as “new institutionalism, Grid-Group Theory, and Actor-Network Theory” (p. 32).

I found the ways in which the authors portrayed social construction theory informed qualitative urban analysis in the past and suggested these new conceptual renderings quite interesting. Until reading how social construction had been used in this area of research I had not thought of discourse analysis as having such an exclusive connection with the theory because I had been more familiar with theory-methodology relationships as presented by qualitative researchers such as Crotty (1998). This conflicting view also helped to remind me of the cross-cultural differences that can occur when comparing and contrasting different academic fields and disciplines. Crotty’s work was grounded in his nursing background so it was a faulty assumption of mine to think his taxonomy would be held universal across qualitative research. The three concepts tendered by Manzi and Jacobs also seemed quite exotic to me since I had not experienced them within my qualitative research “homeland.” These conceptual notions encouraged me to consider the benefits of adopting the flow and change metaphors they suggest when looking at institutions I had previously considered stagnant and constant.

This notion of change and the challenges researchers face when attempting to study these phenomena in flux permeates the methodological choices the rest of the chapter authors recount in the book. Three of these examples include:

- Phronetic Planning Research: Sophie Bond and Michelle Thompson-Fawcett suggest a longitudinal approach organized to consider power, values, discourse and ethics in sustainable policies and programs.
- Narrative Community Inquiry: Phillip Brown describes the utility of embracing a discursive and narrative turn when exploring individuals' story telling resources so as to bring a dynamic understanding of past, present, and future.
- Participatory Action Research as Empowerment Evaluation: Andrew Guilfoyle, Juli Coffin, and Paul Maginn illustrate the utility and challenges of understanding and encouraging not only community involvement, but also community engagement in policy making and evaluation.

These methodologies and the others presented in the book help to bring readers inside the world of these human geographers and urban anthropologists as they attempt to provide insights for policy makers dealing with issues such as globalization, security, demographic shifts, and environmental change. These authors also help us to see the pragmatic fit qualitative methodologies have for researchers exploring these complex communities and for investigators to appreciate the lives of the individuals who call these villages, towns, and cities their home.

The lessons shared by these urban policy researchers from working with Australian Aboriginal communities, women factory workers in Sri Lanka, senior citizens in New Zealand, or sex workers in England can benefit any qualitative researcher regardless of discipline or field. Learning new ways to conduct fieldwork by effective and ethical means while remaining sensitive to the lives of those who we are engaging is time well spent by us all as we struggle with our local studies and concerns. The book also helps us to remember that as we act locally, we should also continue to think globally because if we do we can always learn from those halfway around the world that some of the best lessons are taught by those people right in front of our noses.

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Author Note

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